

A PASSION OF THE SOUTH





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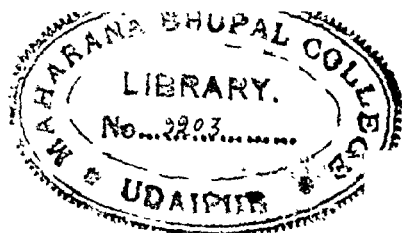
by
ALPHONSE DAUDET

TRANSLATED BY
Henry Blanchamp

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CHAPTER I

IN THE ARENA

ON that Sunday, a white-hot Sunday in July, there was a great festival in the arena of Aps, in Provence, on the occasion of the district competitions. The whole town had come: the weavers of the Chemin-Neuf, the aristocracy of the Calade quarter, even some people from Beaucaire.

"Fifty thousand persons at least!" said the *Forum* in its next day's chronicle; but allowance should be made for Southern exaggeration.

The truth is that an enormous crowd were crushed together in rows on the burning steps of the old amphitheatre, as in the good old times of the Antonines, and that the festival itself counted for nothing in bringing these masses together. Something else was needed than the local races, the wrestling, the jumping, the competition of flute-players and drummers, spectacles more familiar to them than the red sand of the arena, to make them stand two hours on those flaming flagstones, two hours in that killing, blinding sun, breathe in the scorching heat and the dust smelling

like gun-powder, brave ophthalmia, sunstroke, deadly fevers, all the dangers, all the tortures of what is there called a day's fête.

The great attraction for the crowd was Numa Roumestan.

Ah! the proverb which says: "No one is a prophet"—is certainly true of artists, of poets, whose superiority their compatriots are ever the last to recognize, altogether ideal as it finally is, and without visible results; but it could not be applied to statesmen, to political or industrial celebrities, to those strong, influential men who have favours at their command, overflow with blessings of all kinds on their town and its inhabitants.

It is ten years that Numa, the great Numa, the deputy and leader of the parliamentary Right, has been a prophet in the land of Provence, ten years that the town of Aps has shown for this illustrious son the tenderness, the effusive affection of a mother, and of a Southern mother, by its demonstrations, its shouts, its gesticulating carresses. As soon as he arrives in summer after the sittings of the Chamber have broken up, as soon as he appears at the railway station, the ovations begin: the orpheon-players are there, swelling out their embroidered banners amid heroic choruses; porters, sitting on the steps, wait till the old family coach, gone to fetch the Leader, has made three turns of the wheel among the broad plane-trees of the Avenue Berchère, then put themselves in the shafts and draw the great man along, amid "vivats" and raised hats, to the house of the Portals, where he gets out.

This enthusiasm has so passed into a tradition, into the ceremonial of his arrival, that the horses stop of their own accord, as at a relay station, at the corner of the street where the porters are wont to unharness them, and all the whipping in the world would not make them budge a step further. The aspect of the town changes from the first day : it is no longer the dull prefecture, with long siestas lulled by the shrill noise of the grasshoppers on the withered trees of the Cours. Even during the hot hours, the streets, the promenade are lively and crowded with busy people, in visiting hats, black cloth dress, distinct in the brilliant light, casting on the white walls the epileptic shadow of their gestures. The carriage of the bishop, of the president, shakes the road ; then delegates from the suburbs, where Roumestan is worshipped for his Royalist convictions, deputations of warpers come in bands along the whole breadth of the Boulevard, their heads held proudly with their Arles ribbons. The inns are full of country folk, farmers from Camargue or Crau, whose unharnessed waggons encumber the little squares, the streets of the populous quarters, as on market days ; in the evening, the cafés, crammed with people, remain open till late at night, and the windows of the White Club, lit up at unconscionable hours, quiver beneath the tones of the god's voice.

Not a prophet in his own country ! One had only to look at the arena on that blue Sunday in July, 1875, the indifference of the public to what happened in the circus, every face turned

in the same direction, that cross-fire of all eyes towards the same point: the municipal platform where Roumestan sat amid holiday dresses and many-coloured silks, sunshades brought out on ceremonious occasions. One had only to listen to the chatter, the shouts of rapture, the simple observations of this good-natured populace of Aps uttered aloud, some in Provençal, others in a barbaric French, seasoned with garlic, all in that accent, implacable as the sun there, which cuts off and emphasizes every syllable, does not omit a single dot on an "i."

"God! how handsome he is!"

"He's got a bit stouter during the past year."

"He looks all the more imposing like that."

"Don't push so.—There's room for everybody."

"You see him, little one, our Numa.—When you are grown up, you'll be able to say you saw him."

"There's always his Bourbon nose.—And he hasn't lost a tooth."

"And no white hair either——"

"Gracious!—He's not as old as that!—He was born in 1832, the year Louis-Philippe——"

"Ah! the beggarly Philippe!"

"He doesn't look forty-three."

"No, he certainly doesn't.—You splendid man!"

And, with a bold gesture, a tall girl with flashing eyes sent him, from a distance, a kiss that sounded in the air like the cry of a bird.

"Take care, Zette—if his lady saw you!"

"It's the one in blue, his lady?"

No, the one in blue was his sister-in-law, Made-moiselle Hortense, a pretty girl who had only just left the convent and was already going the pace like a dragoon. Madame Roumestan was more sedate, in better style, but she looked far prouder. Those Parisian ladies, they do think a lot of themselves ! And, in the bold picturesqueness of their half-Latin tongue, these women, standing up, their hands shading their eyes, criticised aloud the two Parisians in detail, their little travelling hats, their tight-fitting dresses, without jewels, so great a contrast with the local toilettes : golden chains, skirts of green, of red, rounded off with huge circumferences. The men enumerated the services rendered by Numa to the good cause, his letter to the Emperor, his speech for the white flag. Ah ! if they had a dozen like him in the Chamber, Henry V would have been on the throne a long time.

Intoxicated by this gossip, excited by the surrounding enthusiasm, the worthy Numa could not keep still. He threw himself back on his broad armchair, his eyes shut, his face smilingly turned from one side to the other ; then he jumped up, took long strides over the tribune, bent a moment towards the circus, inhaled that light, those cries, and returned to his place, in a familiar, good-natured way, with his cravat loose, knelt on his seat, and with his back and the soles of his feet to the crowd, talked to his Parisians sitting behind and above him, tried to communicate his delight to them.

Madame Roumestan was bored. It could be

seen in an expression of aloofness, of indifference on her beautifully featured face, which had a rather haughty, chilly look, when the vivid flash of her grey eyes, eyes of pearl, real Parisian eyes, with a half-smile showing her fine teeth, did not give it life.

These southern gaieties, composed of turbulence, of familiarity, this wordy race, all outside, on the surface, the opposite of her own nature which was so deep and serious, chilled her, perhaps, without her exactly accounting to herself for it, because she found again in this people the multiplied, vulgarised type of the man by whose side she had lived for ten years, and whom she had learnt to know at her own cost. The sky, with its excessive brightness, with its scorching heat, did not enrap-ture her either. How did they manage to breathe, all those people? Where did they get the breath for so much outcry? And she began to speak dreamily of a nice Parisian sky, grey and misty, with a fresh April shower on the shining pavements.

“ Oh ! Rosalie, how can you talk like that
—— ”

Her sister and her husband were indignant ; her sister especially, a tall young lady blooming with life, with health, standing as upright as possible so as to see better. She had come to Provence for the first time, and yet one might have said that all these cries, gestures under an Italian sun stirred in her a secret fibre, a slumbering instinct, the southern origin revealed by her long eyebrows united over her houri-like eyes, and

by the paleness of a complexion in which summer set no red.

"Come, my dear Rosalie," protested Roumestan, who was bent on convincing his wife, "get up and look around.—Did Paris ever show you anything like that?"

In the huge, elliptical theatre, which cut off a big piece of the blue sky, thousands of faces were packed together on the terraced steps, with the lively animation of appearance, the varied colouring, the lavish display of gala toilettes and picturesque costumes. Thence, as from a gigantic cellar, issued joyous halloos, loud voices and sounds, volatilised, as it were, by the intense sunlight. This noise, which in the lower trees, which were powdered with dust and tainted with many breaths, was hardly distinguishable, grew louder as it mounted, till it vanished in the pure air. One could especially distinguish the cry of the sellers of milk-loaves who carried from terrace to terrace their basket draped with white linen: "*Li pan ou la!—Li pan ou la!*" And the women, selling fresh water, balancing their green, varnished pitchers, gave you a thirst to hear them calling: "*L'aigo es fresco. Quan vòu beïre?*"—"The water is fresh. Who wants a drink?"

Then, up at the top, children, running and playing on the edge of the amphitheatre, raised over the deafening clamour a crown of shrill sounds, on the plane of air where martins fly, in the kingdom of birds. That sky so pure, that sun of vaporous silver, those Latin intonations preserved in the Provençal idiom, the motionless poses

which the vibration of the air made antique, almost sculptural, the type of the place, those heads struck like medals, with their short, bold noses, the broad shaven chin, Roumestan's up-turned chin, all completed the illusion of a Roman spectacle, even to the lowing of the Landes cows echoing in the subterranean parts, whence issued of old the lions and elephants for fighting.

It was now the turn of the harnessed mules, led by hand, covered with sumptuous Provençal trappings, holding high their small heads adorned with silver bells, rosettes, ribbons, bows, and not frightened by the loud, sharp whip-cracks of the muleteers standing one on each of them. Among the crowd, each village recognized its champions, shouted out :

"There's Cavaillon.—There's Maussane."

The long sumptuous file went right round the arena, filling it with a bright jingling, with luminous sounds of ringing, stopped before Roumestan's box, according him a minute of whip-cracks and jinglings in his honour. But, except a few country people, nobody looked at it. They only had eyes for the municipal platform, which was invaded by a number of persons come to greet Numa, friends, clients, old schoolfellows, proud of their relations with the great man and of showing themselves off on the platform, well in public view.

And how Roumestan welcomed them, without distinction of fortune or origin, with the same inexhaustible effusion !

"*Te !* Monsieur d'Espalion ! and how are you, marquis—— ? "

" *Hé bé !* my old Cabantous, and how goes the piloting ? "

" I greet with all my heart M. le président Bédaride."

Then handshakes, embraces, those kindly taps on the shoulder which double the value of words, which are always too cold to suit southern sympathy. Certainly the interview did not last long. The Leader only listened with one ear, with an abstracted look, and whilst talking said good-day with his hand to the new-comers ; but nobody was offended by his abrupt way of dismissing them with friendly words. " All right, all right—I'll see to it. Send in your request—I'll have it granted."

There were promises of tobacco-shops, of receiver's situations ; what they did not ask for, he guessed, encouraged timid ambitions, excited them. No medal, old Cabantous, after twenty lives saved ! " Send me your papers.—They worship me at the Admiralty !—We shall repair that injustice ! " His voice sounded warm and metallic, striking, detaching the words. One would have thought he was coining new gold pieces. And they all went away ravished by this glittering coinage, came down from the platform with a radiant face, as of a schoolboy carrying off his prize. The finest thing about this devil of a fellow was his prodigious suppleness in assuming the manners, the tone of the people to whom he talked, and that in the most natural, the most unconscious way in the world. Unctuous, with rounded gestures, his mouth compressed, with

President Bédarride, his arm magisterially extended as if he were shaking his gown at the bar; his air martial, his hat bellicose, when talking with Colonel de Rochemaure, and when dealing with Cabantous, his hands in his pockets, his legs bent, with the roll of shoulder of an old sea-dog. From time to time, between two greetings, he would return to his Parisians, radiant, wiping his dripping forehead.

"But, my good Numa," whispered Hortense with a pretty laugh, "where'll you get all the tobacco-shops you've promised?"

Roumestan bent his big, curly head, a little thin at the top: "It's promised, little sister; it's not given."

And guessing a reproach in his wife's silence:

"Don't forget we're in the South, among compatriots speaking the same language. Those worthy fellows all know the value of a promise, and have no more positive expectation of their tobacco-shop than I myself reckon on giving it them. Only they speak of it, it amuses them, their imagination travels. Why deprive them of that joy?—Besides, you see, among Southerners words have but a relative sense—it's a matter of standpoint."

As the phrase pleased him, he repeated it twice or thrice, emphasising the final words. "of standpoint—of standpoint."

"I like those people," said Hortense, who was certainly much amused. But Rosalie was not convinced. "Yet words mean something," she

murmured very seriously, as if speaking to herself from her own deepest depths.

"My dear, that depends on latitudes!"

And Roumestan affirmed his paradox by a shrug of the shoulder, which was habitual to him, the forward movement of a pedlar taking up his pack again. The great orator of the Right retained some bodily habits like that, of which he had never been able to get rid, and which, in a different parliamentary party, would have made him pass for a vulgar man; but at the aristocratic summits where he sat between the Prince d'Anhalt and the Duke de la Rochetaillade, it was a sign of power and vigorous originality, and the Faubourg Saint-Germain went wild about that shrug of the shoulder on the broad, great back which carried the hopes of the French monarchy. If Madame Roumestan had once shared the Faubourg's illusions, they were all gone now, to judge by the disenchantment of her gaze, the slight smile that curled her lip as the Leader spoke, a smile paler even with melancholy than with disdain. Her husband, however, left her abruptly, drawn by the sounds of a strange music that rose from the arena among the shouts of the crowd, who stood up excitedly, crying: "Valmajour! Valmajour!"

Victor in the competition of the day before, the renowned Valmajour, the first tabour-player in Provence, came to welcome Numa with his prettiest tunes. He was really handsome, this Valmajour, standing in the centre of the circus, his yellow woollen vest on his shoulder, his light red scarf round his waist, contrasting with the

"It came to me," he said in his bizarre French, "it came to me one night as I listened to the nightingale singing. I thought in myself: What! Valmajour, there is the bird of the good God whose throat suffices him for all the trills, and what he does with one hole, can't you do with the three holes of your flute?"

He spoke deliberately, confidently and softly in a fine tone of voice, without any feeling of being ridiculous. Moreover, nobody would have dared to smile in the presence of Numa's enthusiasm, lifting his arms, stamping enough to break through the tribune. "How magnificent he is!—What an artist!" And, after him, the mayor, the general, President Bédarride, M. Roumavage, a big brewer at Beaucaire, Peruvian vice-consul, tightly girt in a carnival costume all over silver, and others besides, carried away by the Leader's authority, repeated in convinced accents: "What an artist!" It was also Hortense's feeling, and she expressed it with her expansiveness: "Oh! yes, a great artist!"—whilst Madame Roumestan murmured: "But you'll turn his head, the poor man." Still, it hardly appeared so, from the calm manner of Valmajour, who did not even show emotion when Numa told him abruptly:

"Come to Paris, my dear chap, your fortune's made."

"Oh! my sister wouldn't like to let me go," he answered smiling.

His mother was dead. He lived with his father and sister in a farmhouse bearing their name, three leagues from Aps, on Mount Cordoue.

Roumestan swore he would visit him before going. He would speak with his relations; he was sure to settle the matter.

"I will help you, Numa," said a small voice behind him.

Valmajour bowed without a word, turned on his heels, and went down the broad platform carpet, his case on his arm, his head upright, with the slight hip-movement of the Provençal who loves rhythm and dance. His comrades below were waiting for him, shook hands. Then a shout resounded: "The farandole!" an immense clamour, doubled by the echo of the vaults, the passages. In a moment the circus was full, full enough to burst the barriers, with a mass of villagers, a mixture of white neckerchiefs, loud skirts, velvet ribbons fluttering on lace caps, braided blouses, woollen vests.

At a rolling of the tambourine, the crowd formed in line, defiled in bands, legs extended, hands joined. A trill of the flute made the whole circus undulate, and the "farandole," led by a youth from Barbantane, the country of famous dancers, slowly marched along, unwinding its rings, cutting capers, filling with a confused din, with a noise of rustling and breathing, the enormous gulf of the exit in which it was gradually swallowed up. Valmajour followed at an even, solemn pace, pushed the big tambourine with his knee as he walked, and played louder and louder as the compact heap in the arena, already half lost to sight in the blue ashes of the twilight, unravelled itself like a bobbin of gold and of silk.

"Look up there!" said Roumestan suddenly.

It was the foremost part of the dancers emerging between the vault arches of the first terrace, whilst the tabour-player and the last dancers were still footing it in the circus. And the farandole went up, went up, reached the higher galleries, which the sun was still illuminating with a tawny light.

Down below, on the emptied platform—for people were going, and the ranks of dancers were growing larger above the empty stone steps—the worthy Numa asked his wife, as he threw a small lace shawl over her shoulders against the coolness of the evening:

"Well, isn't it fine?—isn't it fine?"

"Very fine," quoth the Parisian, stirred this time to the depths of her artist nature.

And the great man of Aps seemed prouder of this approval than of the noisy homage with which he had been deafened during two hours.

CHAPTER II

ROUMESTAN'S LOVE-MAKING

NUMA was twenty-two, when he went to Paris to finish the legal studies he had begun at Aix. He was at that time a good-natured fellow, full of high spirits, noisy, florid of complexion, with fine gold-brown eyes, and a shock of black curly hair that fell over half his forehead like an otter-skin cap without a peak. Not the shadow of an idea, of an ambition, beneath that sumptuous covering. A regular student of Aix, very good at billiards and pool, without an equal at drinking a bottle of champagne at a party, at hunting cats with torches till three in the morning in the broad streets of the old aristocratic and parliamentary town, but interested in nothing, never opening a paper or a book, steeped in the provincial foolishness which shrugs its shoulders at everything and clothes its ignorance with a reputation of plain good sense.

The Quartier Latin brisked him up a bit, but there was no reason why. Like his compatriots, he lived at the Café Malmus. It was at the corner of the Rue du Four-Saint-Germain, with three

storeys of windows as big as those of a draper, and was full of noise from the billiard-room and the cries of a *clientèle* of young savages from the South. Apart from the lectures, which they attended assiduously, they spent their time there.

There were few women among them. Scarcely two or three on each floor, whom their sweethearts brought there with a shame-faced look, and who spent the evening beside them and a "bock," glancing over the big cartoons of the illustrateds, dumb and out of place among these Southern youths, brought up in contempt "of the female" (*dou fémélan*). Mistresses! *pardi*, they knew where to get them, at night or on the instant, but never for long. Bullier, the music-halls, the late suppers did not tempt them. They much preferred to stay at Malmus's, talk patois, wander between the café, the lecture-room, and the table d'hôte.

In this limited *milieu* Numa was easily an eagle. He was more noisy than the others, and he enjoyed a superiority, at any rate a reputation for originality because of his lively liking for music. He went to the pit of the Opera two or three times a week, and returned full of recitatives and tunes, which he sang with a fairly good throat-voice which was quite untrainable. When he reached Malmus's, when he advanced theatrically among the tables, singing some Italian finale, shouts of delight welcomed him from every storey; they cried: "*Hé!* what an artist!" And, as happens in bourgeois environment, the word drew to him a caressing curiosity in women's looks, a curl of envious irony on the men's lips. This artistic

reputation was afterwards of use to him in his career.

As for the lectures, he was similarly easy-going ; though only half-prepared, for he was lazy, feared work and solitude, he passed rather brilliant examinations, thanks to his boldness, his Southern subtlety, which always enabled him to discover the weak point in a professor's vanity. Moreover his face, with its frank, amiable expression, helped him and, as a lucky star, lighted the way before him.

When he became advocate, his parents summoned him home, because the moderate allowance they made cost them too bitter privation. But the prospect of shutting himself up at Aps had nothing in it to attract the indefinite ambition which the Provençal felt underlay his taste for the stir and bright intelligence of Paris. With great difficulty, he was allowed to take two years more to prepare for his doctor's degree. This time was passed and he was about to return home, when he met at the house of the Duchess de San-Donnino, at one of those musical parties which were open to him owing to his good voice and his musical bent, Sagnier, the great Sagnier, the Legitimist advocate, brother of the Duchess and a confirmed melomaniac, whom he had enraptured by his verve, breaking into society monotony, and by his enthusiasm for Mozart. Sagnier offered to take him as his fourth secretary. The salary was nothing, but it was no slight advantage to get a berth in the office of the first lawyer in Paris, as Sagnier had a huge amount of Parliamentary work and many influential

clients in the Faubourg Saint-Germain. Roumestan père was unfortunately determined to cut off his allowance, expecting in that way to bring back his only son, an advocate of twenty-six, who was of an age to earn his living. The café-proprietor Malmus then intervened.

He was a type, this Malmus, a fat, asthmatic, pale man, who, from a mere café waiter, had become proprietor of one of the biggest establishments in Paris, by giving credit and by usury. He used at one time to advance students their month's allowance, which he made them pay thrice over when the ship arrived. Now he was rich, had perfected his method of business, based it entirely on credit, unlimited credit. The information he got from Aps gave him full confidence in Roumestan, whose father, once a cotton-spinner, had been ruined by speculations and inventions, and now lived modestly on an inspectorship of insurances; but his sister, Madame Portal, the childless widow of a wealthy magistrate, was sure to leave her nephew her whole fortune. That is why Malmus wanted to keep him in Paris: "Go to Sagnier's—I'll help you." The secretary of a well-known man could not live in a student's lodging, so he furnished him some bachelor's rooms on the Quai Voltaire, and undertook to pay his expenses; and in this way the future leader began his campaign, apparently comfortably off, in reality terribly impecunious, in want of ready money. Sagnier's friendship brought him splendid connections. The Faubourg welcomed him. But these social successes, these invitations to town

and country-houses, only resulted in increasing his necessary expenses. His Aunt Portal helped him now and then, but accompanied her contributions with long lectures and Biblical threats against ruinous Paris. The position was untenable.

At the end of the year, Numa was looking out for something else ; Sagnier, besides, needed hard workers, and that was not Numa's line. He was invincibly indolent, and especially dreaded steady, constant office life and work. He was radically wanting in concentration, owing to the vivacity of his imagination, the continual surging of ideas in his brain, the mobility of mind which could be seen even in his writing, which was always different. He was all outside, in voice and in gesture like a tenor.

"When I'm not speaking, I'm not thinking," he would say very naïvely ; and it was true. With him the words did not spring from the idea, but the idea from the words. He was himself amused and amazed at his own fluency. In speaking, he revealed to himself a sensibility he did not know he possessed, was moved by the vibration of his own voice, by certain tones that stirred his heart, filled his eyes with tears. There were in him, assuredly, the qualities of an orator ; but he was unaware of them, hardly ever having a chance of using them at Sagnier's.

Yet this period of a year with the great Legitimist advocate was decisive in his life. He won there convictions, a party, a taste for politics, a thirst for fortune and glory. The glory came first.

Some months after leaving his employer, the

title of "Sagnier's secretary," which he retained, gave him the chance of defending a small Legitimist paper, *Le Furet*, much circulated in the well-to-do world. He did so with much success and good luck. He came unprepared, his hands in his pockets, spoke two hours with an insolent *verve* and so much liveliness that he made the judges listen to the end. His accent, the terrible drawling of which his idleness had prevented his getting rid, lent something biting to his irony. It was a force, the rhythm of that very Southern eloquence, theatrical and familiar, with its especial light and clearness, such as are found in the work of the Southerners even as in their utterly limpid landscapes.

The newspaper was of course condemned, and paid for the advocate's big success in fines and imprisonment. Sagnier, who had come to hear him speak, embraced him in court. "Go and be a great man, my dear Numa," he declared, rather surprised at having hatched a falcon's egg. The most astonished, however, was Roumestan, who went away as in a dream, his own words echoing in his buzzing ears, as he went down the vast, banisterless staircase of the Palais, quite dazed.

After this success, this ovation, a shower of panegyric letters, the yellow smiles of his *confrères*, the advocate thought himself fairly started, waited patiently for briefs in his office, but nothing came, except a few more invitations to dinner and a pretty bronze from Barbédienne's, presented by the staff of the *Furet*. The new great man had

to face the same difficulties, the same uncertainties as to the future. He was reduced to giving lessons in law in the Legitimist and Catholic society ; but the work seemed beneath his reputation, his successes at the Conférence, the praises with which his name was garlanded in the party journals.

Some years thus passed, during which his name became better known, but always without profit except a few of Barbédienne's bronzes, then he was called upon to defend a shopkeeper of Avignon, who had had some seditious *foulards* manufactured, with a design displaying a deputation standing round the Count de Chambord, which was confused through the clumsiness of the printing, but was emphasized by an imprudent " H. V." surrounded by an escutcheon. Roumestan played an excellent comedy scene, grew indignant that the least political allusion could be seen there. " H. V. ! " Why, it was Horace Vernet, presiding over a commission of the Institute !

This tarasconade had a local success which did more for his future than all the Parisian puffs, and above all won for him the active sympathies of Aunt Portal. It expressed itself first by a despatch of olive oil and white melons, then followed a crowd of other provisions : figs, pepper, *canissons* from Aix, *poulargue* from Martigues, jujubes, *azeroles*, carobs, common, insignificant fruits, of which the old lady was madly fond, and which the advocate allowed to rot at the bottom of a drawer. Some time after, a letter arrived, which showed in its thick, goose-quill writing the aunt's brusqueness of accent, her quaintnesses

of expression, and revealed her slipshod mind in the utter lack of punctuation, the quick leaps from one idea to another.

However, Numa thought he could gather that the worthy woman wanted to marry him to the daughter of a Councillor of the Paris Court of Appeal, M. le Quesnoy, whose wife—a Demoiselle Soustelle of Aps—had been brought up with her at the convent of La Calade—large fortune—pretty, spirited, with a rather constrained air, but marriage would clear it away. And if the marriage took place, what would Aunt Portal give her Numa? A hundred thousand francs in good money down on the wedding-day?

Beneath the provincialisms of the language, there was a serious proposal, so serious that two days after Numa got an invitation to dine with the Quesnoys. He went there, rather excited. The Councillor, whom he often met at the Palais, was one of the men who impressed him most. Tall, thin, a proud face, of morbid pallor, a keen, piercing eye, a mouth as if sealed, the old magistrate, who came from Valenciennes and seemed himself like a fortification of Vauban's, embarrassed him with his cold Northern manner. The high position he owed to his splendid works on the penal law, to his large fortune, to the austerity of his life, a position which would have been still higher, had it not been for the independence of his opinions and the stern isolation in which he shut himself since the death of a son of twenty, all these facts passed before the eyes of the Southerner, as, one evening in September, 1865, he went up the broad,

stone staircase, with carved iron banisters, of the *hôtel* de Quesnoy, one of the oldest in the Place Royale.

The large drawing-room into which he was shown, the solemnity of the high ceilings, the light painting on the panels of the doors, the hangings of striped damask framing the windows which looked on to an old balcony and an entire red corner of the brick buildings of the *place*, were not likely to dissipate the impression. But Madame Le Quesnoy's welcome soon put him at his ease. This little woman, with her sad kindly smile, closely shawled and weighed down with rheumatism, from which she suffered since she lived in Paris, kept the accent, the habits of her dear South, the love of everything that reminded her of it. She made Roumestan sit by her, and said, looking at him tenderly in the half-light: "He is quite the portrait of Evéline." The Christian name of Aunt Portal, which Numa was not accustomed to hear, touched him like a memory of childhood. Madame Le Quesnoy told him she had long wanted to know her friend's nephew: they were however, so dull now: they had not gone into society since their melancholy loss. But they had now made up their minds to receive a little, not that they grieved less, but because of their daughters, the eldest of whom was nearly twenty; and turning to the balcony, which rang with youthful laughter, she called: "Rosalie—Hortense—come here. Here is M. Roumestan."

Ten years after this evening he remembered the calm, smiling appearance, in the frame of the high

window and the tender light of the setting sun, of the beautiful young girl smoothing her hair, which the younger sister had disarranged in her play, and coming to him, with bright eyes, straight glance, without the least coquettish shyness.

He felt himself at once in confidence, in sympathy with her.

Once or twice, however, during dinner, whilst they were talking, Numa thought he caught sight, in the expression of the beautiful, clear-hued profile near him, of a disdainful passing shiver, no doubt the "constrained look," of which Aunt Portal spoke, and which Rosalie had from her likeness to her father. But the parted lips soon began to smile, and the deep-blue eyes softened into a kindly attentiveness, a delight of surprise which she did not even try to hide. Born and educated in Paris, Mademoiselle Le Quesnoy had always felt a resolute aversion from the South, whose accent, manners, landscape, partly known through holiday journeys, were all alike antipathetic to her. There was in it a kind of instinct of race, and it was a subject of affectionate quarrels between mother and daughter.

"I will never marry a man from the South," Rosalie would say laughingly, and she had imagined to herself a type of him, noisy, coarse and empty-brained, a sort of operatic tenor or traveller in Bordeaux wines, with expressive and regular head. Roumestan was certainly a trifle like this clear image conjured up by the mocking little Parisian; but his warm, musical words, which that evening had an irresistible power amid the environing

sympathy, exalted, refined his countenance. After a few words in a low voice between those sitting next each other at table, those *hors-d'œuvre* of conversation which go round with the *marinades* and the caviare, the talk became general. The recent fêtes at Compiègne were mentioned, and those travesties of hunts, in which the guests figured as lords and ladies of Louis XV's time. Numa, who knew old Le Quesnoy's Liberal ideas, launched out in a superb, almost prophetic improvisation, showed up the Court as a circus, with its horsemen and women prancing beneath a stormy sky, rushing to the death of the stag mid lightning and distant thunder-claps; then the deluge when the fête is at its highest, the hunt entirely drowned, the whole monarchical carnival ending in a splash of blood and of mud!

Perhaps the speech was not quite new, perhaps Roumestan had already tried it at the Conférence. But never had his vividness, his accent of honourableness in revolt ever excited the enthusiasm suddenly visible in the limpid, deep look he felt turned towards him, whilst the Madame Le Quesnoy's sweet face was lit up with a ray of malice, and seemed to ask her daughter: "Well! what do you think of him, the man of the South?"

Rosalie was captured. The beautiful, deep voice stirred the inmost parts of her temperament, and the generous ideas expressed with such eloquence found an echo in her passion for truth and justice. Like women, who at the theatre identify the singer with the song, the actor with the rôle, she forgot the allowance that must be made for

the virtuoso. Oh ! if she had only known how empty the advocate's phrases were, how little he cared for the galas at Compiègne, and how it would only have required an Imperial invitation to decide him to take part in those cavalcades, in which his vanity, his instincts as a player would have been agreeably satisfied ! But she was entirely under his spell. The table seemed magnified to her, the tired, sleepy faces of the few guests, a president of a chamber, a neighbouring doctor, seemed transfigured : and when they passed into the drawing-room, the lustre, illuminated for the first time since her brother's death, dazzled her with a warmth as of a real sun. The sun was Roumestan. He brought back life to the stately house, banished the mourning, the black that haunted every corner, those atoms of grief which float about in old dwellings, brought light into the big mirrors and life into the delicate panels which had faded during a century.

" You like painting, monsieur ? "

" Oh ! mademoiselle, there's nothing I like better——"

The truth is, he knew nothing at all about it ; but on this, as on every other subject, he had a stock of excellent phrases ready, and, while the card-tables were being prepared, painting was as good an excuse as any other for a pleasant talk with the beautiful girl. Anybody seeing them together and noticing the eloquent assurance of his talk, together with Rosalie's attentive air, would have said the advocate was some famous master giving his pupil a lesson.

"Mamma, may we go into your room?—I should like to show monsieur the hunting panel."

They crossed a passage lined with books, and came to the room which was as stately and old as the drawing-room. The hunting panel was over a small, finely-sculptured door.

"We can't see anything," said the young girl.

She lifted up the two-branched candelabra, which she had taken from a card-table, and holding her hand high, with her bust stretched forth, she lit up the panel representing a Diana, with the crescent on her brow, among her huntresses, in an Elysian landscape. But with that upright gesture of a canephora, which cast a double flame over her simple head-dress, her bright eyes, with the disdainful smile, the lithe symmetry of her virgin body, she was more Diana than the goddess herself. Roumestan gazed at her, and smitten by her modest charm, by the whiteness of her real youth, he forgot who she was, what he was doing there, his dreams of fortune and ambition. A mad impulse came upon him to hold in his arms that supple waist, to kiss that lovely hair, whose exquisite odour intoxicated him, to carry off that beautiful girl, and to make her the charm and happiness of his whole life; and something suggested to him that, if he attempted it, she would let him do so, that she was his, quite his, vanquished, conquered the first day. Flame and wind of the South, you are irresistible.

CHAPTER III

ROUMESTAN REVEALED

IF there were ever two persons unsuited to live together, they were indeed these two. Opposite in instincts, education, temperament, race, not having the same ideas about anything, it was a case of North and South, without hope of possible fusion. Passion lives on such contrasts, it laughs when they are pointed out, feeling itself superior ; but in daily life, in the monotonous return of days and nights under the same roof, the mist of the intoxication that constitutes love is scattered, and people see and judge each other.

In the new household the awakening did not come at once, to Rosalie at least. Clear of sight and sensible in everything else, she was long blind about Numa, without understanding how far she was his superior. He had soon recovered himself. The passions of the South are swift, in direct proportion to their violence. Besides, the Southerner is so convinced of woman's inferiority, that when once married, assured of happiness, he establishes himself as master, as a pasha, accepting love as homage, and thinking it kind of him even to accept

it ; because in fact it takes up time to be loved, and Numa was very busy, with the new mode of life necessitated by his marriage, his large fortune, his high position at the Palais as Le Quesnoy's son-in-law.

Aunt Portal's hundred thousand francs had served to pay Malmus and the upholsterer, to pass the sponge over his heart-breaking, endless bachelor's life, and the transition seemed pleasant from the lowly plush bench to the dining-room in the Rue Scribe, where he presided, opposite his elegant little Parisian, over sumptuous dinners to the princes of law and song. The Provençal liked a brilliant life, pleasure of the luxurious and magnificent kind ; but he liked it especially at home, with that amount of free-and-easiness which allows of a cigar and a dubious story. Rosalie accepted everything, accommodated herself to the inconvenience of keeping open house, with the table laid for ten or fifteen guests every night. She endured it without complaint, carried away in the impetuosity of her terrible great man, who agitated her by all his turbulences, and now and then smiled at his little wife between two thunders. She only regretted one thing, it was that she did not have him enough to herself. Even at breakfast, at that early lawyer's breakfast cut short by the hour of consultation, there was always the friend between them, that companion whom the Provençal could not dispense with, the everlasting talker necessary to the spouting forth of his ideas, the arm on which he liked to lean, to which he confided his too heavy portfolio on his way to the Palais.

Ah! how gladly she would have accompanied him over the bridges, how happy she would have been, on rainy days, to come and wait for him in their *coupé* and to return with him, closely shut in, behind the quivering mist of the windows. But she did not venture now to ask him, sure that he would always have a pretext, an appointment, in the Salle des Pas-Perdus, with one of the three hundred intimates of whom the Southerner said affectionately—

“He worships me.—He would throw himself into the fire for me.”

It was his way of understanding friendship. For the rest, no selection in his companions. His easy temper, the liveliness of his caprice, threw him at the head of the first comer and took him away as readily. Every week a new fancy, a name that recurred in all his phrases, which *Rosalie carefully wrote down, at every meal, on the small menu card, and which then suddenly vanished, as if the gentleman's personality was as fragile, as easily burnt up, as the little coloured cards.*

Among these friends of passage, one alone stayed less as a friend than a custom of childhood, for Roumestan and Bompard were born in the same street. He formed part of the household, and at her marriage the young wife found installed in her house, in the place of honour, like a piece of family furniture, that lean person, with a brigand's head, a big aquiline nose, eyes like agate balls in a dry, saffron skin, a piece of Cordova leather wrinkled by continual contortions. Yet

Bompard had never been a comedian. At one time he sang in the chorus at the Italian opera, and it was there Numa had found him again. Apart from this detail, it was impossible to get anything precise about his undulating existence. He had seen everything, carried on every trade, had been everywhere. If anybody spoke before him of a celebrated man, a famous event, he would observe: "That's a friend of mine," or "I was there—I've just come from there," and at once would follow a story in proof.

His present was no less obscure and mysterious than his past. Where did he live? On what? Now he spoke of a big business in asphalt, of a portion of Paris to be covered after an economical system; then suddenly, absorbed in his discovery of an infallible remedy for phylloxera, he would be only waiting for a letter from the minister to win the prize of a hundred thousand francs.

This delirious Southerner was Roumestan's joy. He took him with him everywhere, using him as a butt, drawing him out. When Numa stopped to talk to anybody on the Boulevard, Bompard went a few paces off on the pretext of lighting a cigar. He was to be seen at funerals, at first nights, asking hurriedly: "Have you seen Roumestan?" He became as well known. But Rosalie could not tolerate this sharer of her happiness, always between herself and her husband, filling up the rare moments when they might have been alone. The two friends spoke a dialect which left her in the cold, laughed at local, untranslatable jokes. What she particularly urged

against him was his need of lying, his inventions in which she had at first believed, so foreign was imposture to her straight, frank nature, whose greatest charm was the harmonious accord of word and thought, an accord perceptible in the sonorousness, the assurance of her crystal voice.

"I don't like him—he's a liar," she would say in a deeply indignant tone, which greatly amused Roumestan. And, defending his friend, he would reply—

"But no, he is not a liar—he's a man of imagination, an awakened dreamer, who speaks his dreams. My country is full of such people.—It's the sun, it's the accent. Look at my aunt Portal, and myself. at every instant, if I did not watch over myself——"

A little hand protested, shut his mouth: "Hush, hush—I shouldn't like you any more, if you were of that South."

But he was; and despite the Parisian manner, the society polish that checked him, she was about to see that terrible South, narrow, brutal, illogical, come out in him. The first time it was a matter of religion; Roumestan followed the tradition of his province in that as in everything else. He was the Provençal Catholic, who does not act up to his faith, never goes to church except to look for his wife at the end of the Mass, remaining near the holy water, with the superior air of a paterfamilias at a pantomime, confesses only in time of cholera, but would let himself be hung or martyred for the faith he does not feel, which moderates nothing of his passions or his vices.

When he married, he knew his wife was nominally of the same creed as himself; he asked no further. All the women he knew, his mother, his cousin, Aunt Portal, as well as the Duchess of San-Donnino, were ardent Catholics. He was therefore much surprised, after some months of marriage, to notice that Rosalie did not practise her religion. He observed—

“So you never go to confession?”

“No, my friend,” she said, without emotion—
“nor you either, so far as I see.”

“Oh! I! it's not the same thing.”

“Why?”

She looked at him with eyes so sincerely, so luminously amazed: she had so little the air of suspecting her womanly inferiority, that he found no answer, and left her to explain. Oh! she was not a free-thinker, an “intellectual.” Educated in an excellent Paris boarding-school, with a priest of Saint-Laurent for religion, up to seventeen years of age, up to her leaving school, and even at home for a few months more, she had continued her religious practices with her mother, a devout Southerner; then one day something broke inside her, she had declared to her parents the insurmountable repugnance caused her by confession. Her mother had tried to overcome what she thought a caprice; but M. Le Quesnoy had interposed.

“Let her be, let her be—I was taken like her, at the same age.”

And thenceforth she had only had her young conscience to take advice and guidance from.

Still, as a Parisian, a woman of the world, who had a horror of acts of independence which were in bad taste ; if Numa insisted on going to Church she would accompany him as she had long accompanied her mother, without, however, agreeing to the lie, the grimace of belief she no longer possessed.

He heard her with stupefaction, frightened at hearing such things spoken by her, and with an energetic assertion of her moral being which routed all his native ideas on feminine dependence.

"Then you don't believe in God?" he asked in his finest advocate style, his finger solemnly raised toward the moulding of the ceiling. She cried: "Is it possible?" so spontaneously, so sincerely that it was equal to a declaration of faith. So he fell back on society, social conventions, the solidarity of the religious and monarchical idea. All these ladies confessed, the Duchess, Madame d'Escarbès; they received their confessor at table, at their parties. It would have a deplorable effect if people knew—— He stopped, feeling that he was muddled, and the discussion ended. The next two or three Sundays he made a great point of taking his wife to Mass, which gave Rosalie the luck of a walk on her husband's arm. He soon tired of the habit however, made an excuse of business, and stopped his Catholic manifestation.

This first misunderstanding did not trouble the household at all. As if wishing to earn forgiveness, the young wife redoubled her attentions,

her ingenuous and ever-smiling submission. Perhaps, less blind than during the earlier days, she confusedly had a presentiment of things she did not even dare to avow to herself, but she was nevertheless happy, because she wanted to be, because she was living in that paradise into which the change of life, the revelation of their woman's destiny, casts young married women, still enveloped in those dreams, those uncertainties which are like the floating white *tulles* of their wedding-dress. The awakening could not be delayed. In her case it was fearful and sudden.

One summer's day—they were spending the fine season at Orsay on the Le Quesnoys' estate—Rosalie, when her father and husband had gone off to Paris, as they did every morning, she found she wanted a little pattern for the small outfit at which she was working. Yes, *mon Dieu!* a baby's outfit. Superb ones, ready made, are on sale; but true mothers, those who are mothers beforehand, love to sew, to cut out themselves. On no account whatever did Rosalie wish to deprive herself of this joy, nor would she have allowed any other hand at the gigantic work undertaken five months since, when she had become sure of her happiness—and the pattern was wanting.

"Send your maid," said the mother. The maid, forsooth!—How would she know? "No, no, I'll go myself.—I'll buy my things before twelve. Then I'll go and surprise Numa and eat half his lunch."

The idea of this bachelor meal with her hus-

band in the apartment in the Rue Scribe amused her like an escapade. She was smiling all to herself at it, when, her errands finished, she went up the carpetless staircase of the Parisian house, and said to herself, cautiously putting the key in the lock so as to surprise him: "I've come a bit late.—He will have lunched."

There was nothing in fact in the dining-room but the remains of a choice little banquet, with covers for two, and the valet in his check jacket installed at the table, finishing the bottles and dishes. She saw at first nothing but her failure, through her own fault. Ah! if she hadn't loitered so long in the shop, with the pretty trifles in embroidery and lace.

"Monsieur has gone?"

The valet's slowness in reply, the sudden pallor of that broad impudent face, flattened down between the long whiskers, did not then strike her. She only saw the dismay of the servant who had been caught at his thieving and gluttony. Still, he had to say that his master was there—and at business—and would be a long time. But what a time he took to stammer it out, what trembling hands he had, the man, as he cleared the table and laid his mistress's cover.

"Did he lunch alone?"

"Yes, madame—that is—with M. Bompard."

She was looking at some black lace thrown on a chair. He also saw it, and, as their eyes met, it was like a flash of lightning to her. At once, without a word, she darted forward, crossed the small ante-room, reached the door of the study,

opened it wide, and fell unconscious. They had not even shut themselves in.

And if you had seen the woman, her forty years of faded blonde, her thin lips, her eyes haggard and wrinkled like the skin of an old glove; violet marks under the lids, scars of a life of pleasure, square shoulders, hideous voice. Only, she was noble—the Marquise d'Escarbès!—and, for the Southerner that took the place of everything, the coat-of-arms concealed the woman. Separated from her husband by a scandalous trial, embroiled with her family and the great houses of the Faubourg, Madame d'Escarbès had rallied to the Empire, had opened a political, diplomatic, dubiously police-attended *salon*, which was visited by the most prominent personages of the time, without their wives; then, after two years of intrigues, when she had created a party and influence for herself, she thought of appealing. Roumestan, who had pleaded for her in the first instance, could hardly refuse to follow her. He hesitated, however, because of his very pronounced opinions. But the marquise flattered the advocate's vanity in such ways, that he resisted no more. The appeal being now near at hand, they met every day, sometimes in his rooms, sometimes at her house.

Rosalie nearly died of this horrible discovery. The child was still-born, the mother survived. But when, after three days of agony, she recovered her memory for suffering, she had a crisis of weeping, a bitter flood nothing could stop. Without a cry, without a complaint, when she had finished

weeping at her friend's, her husband's treason, her tears redoubled at the sight of the empty cradle, in which slept, alone, the treasures of the baby-outfit under transparent blue curtains. Poor Numa was about as despairing. The great hope of a little Roumestan, of "the eldest," always endowed with prestige in Provençal families, destroyed, nullified by his fault, his wife's pale face buried in an expression of renunciation, her grief with teeth clenched, with dull sobs that pierced his soul, so different from his own outbursts and the violent superficial sensibility he displayed, sitting at the foot of his victim's bed, his eyes haggard, his lips trembling.

"Rosalie—come now!" that was all he could find to say, but what a meaning was there in the "Come now!" uttered in the Southern tone, readily moved to pity! They meant: "Don't keep on sorrowing, my poor creature.—Is it worth while? Does it prevent my loving you?"

Truly he loved her, as far as his shallowness allowed him a lasting attachment. He did not dream of anybody but her to direct his household, look after him, fondle him. He who said so ingenuously: "I have need of devotion around me!" was certain that his wife's was the most complete, the most loving he could desire, and the idea of losing her frightened him. If that is not love!

Alas! Rosalie imagined a quite different thing. Her life was broken, her idol upset, her confidence destroyed for ever. And yet, she forgave. She forgave out of pity, as a mother gives way to a child who cries, who humiliates himself;

also because of the dignity of their name, her father's name, which the scandal of a separation would have tarnished, and because, as her family believed her happy, she could not disillusion them. She warned him that he could not count upon forgiveness if he renewed the outrage. Never again ! In that case their two lives would be cruelly, radically parted, before the world !—This was signified in a tone, with a look, in which the wife's pride took its revenge on all the social conventions and shackles.

Numa understood, swore never to do so again, and sincerely. He still grieved at having risked his happiness, the repose he held so dear, for a pleasure which only gratified his vanity. And the relief at having rid himself of his *grande dame*, this raw-boned marquise who, apart from the coat-of-arms, had no appeal for his senses, was almost as pleasing to him as his wife's clemency, the restored peace in the house.

He was as happy as before. There was no change in the appearance of their life. The table was always spread, the same parties given, at which Roumestan sang, declaimed, entertained without suspecting that near him two beautiful eyes were watching, wide open, made clearer in sight by real tears. She really saw him now, her great man, all gesture, all speech, kindly and generous by starts, but of a brief kindliness, composed of caprice, of ostentation and a co-quettish desire to please. She felt what little substance there was in that nature which hesitated in its convictions as in its hates ; above all she

was frightened on her own and on his account at his weakness hidden beneath big words and boisterous tones, a weakness that excited her indignation, but at the same time attached her to him by the need of maternal protection, on which a wife bases her devotion when love has departed. And, ever ready to give herself, to devote herself to him in spite of his treason, she had only one secret fear: "provided he does not discourage me!"

Clear of perception as she was, Rosalie soon noticed the change taking place in her husband's opinions. His relations with the Faubourg grew strained. Old Sagnier's nankeen waistcoat, the fleur-de-llys of his scarf-pin, no longer inspired him with the same veneration. He thought his great intelligence was waning. Numa was slowly evolving, gradually opening his doors to Imperialist instabilities, to be met with in Madame d'Escarbès's *salon*, whose influence had prompted the change of front. "Look after your great man, I believe he is wobbling," said the Councillor to his daughter, one day, when the advocate had amused himself at table about the Frohsdorf party, which he compared to Don Quixote's wooden Pegasus which was motionless and nailed to its place, whilst the cavalier with eyes bandaged imagined he was making a long journey through the sky. She had not to put many questions. Though he could be a dissembler, his lies, which he disdained to back up with any subtleties, had an abandon about them which immediately convicted him. Coming one morning into his study, she surprised him much absorbed in the com-

position of a letter, bent her head to the level of his :

" To whom are you writing ? "

He stammered, tried to invent something, and penetrated by her look, which haunted him like a conscience, he had an outburst of compulsory frankness—it was a letter to the Emperor written in a bold emphatic style in which he accepted the post of Councillor of State. It began: *As a Vendéan of the South, grown up in the monarchical faith and the respectful veneration of the past, I believe I am doing no violence to honour or to my conscience—*

" You will not send that ! " she said impetuously.

He began by getting angry, speaking loudly, brutally, like a regular Aps bourgeois laying down the law in his household. What was she interfering for ? What did she mean ? Did he bother her about the shape of her hats or the makers of her new dresses ? He thundered forth, as if in court, whilst Rosalie remained humbly quiet, almost contemptuous.

" You will not send that letter," she resumed.

" It would be giving the lie to your life, to your promises."

" Promises ?—To whom ? "

" To me. Remember how we got to know each other, how you captured my heart with your rebellious, your lofty indignations against the Imperial masquerade. And I cared still less for your opinions than for a straightforward line of conduct, once adopted, a man's will that I admired in you."

He defended himself. Ought he to bury himself all his life in a party that was frozen up, without resources, a camp abandoned under the snow? Besides, it was not he that went to the Empire, but the Empire that came to him. The Emperor was an excellent man, full of ideas, very superior to his *entourage*.—And all the usual good excuses for leaving anybody in the lurch. Rosalie accepted none, and showed him his clumsiness in his felony. "So you don't see how uneasy all those people are, how they feel the ground is ruined, sapped around them. The least shock, a loosened stone, and the whole crumbles—into what an abyss!"

She gave details, such as a silent woman culls and ponders on, of the after-dinner talk, when the men gathered apart leave their wives, intelligent or not, to languish in those banal conversations which toilette, society ill-natured gossip are not always enough to make lively. Roumestan was astounded: "Funny little woman!" Whence had she taken all she had just said? He could not get over the fact that she was so acute, and in one of those ardent impulses which are the charm of such impetuous characters, he took that clever, beautiful young head of hers in his hands and covered it with a rain of tender kisses.

"You're right, a hundred times right—I must write the exact opposite."

He was about to tear up his rough draft, but there was a phrase at the beginning which pleased him and which might be used again, by modifying it somewhat as follows: *A Vendéan of the South*

grown up in the monarchical faith and the respectful veneration of the past, I am convinced I should be doing violence to honour and my conscience, if I accepted the post which your Majesty——

This refusal, very politely, but very decidedly worded, was published in the Legitimist journals, put Roumestan in a quite new position, made his name synonymous with incorruptible loyalty. Some time after, the Empire went to pieces ; and when the Bordeaux Assembly met, Numa Roumestan had three Departments of the South to choose from, which had elected him deputy solely on account of his letter. His first speeches had soon made him leader of all the Right parties.

Councillor-General of his Department, the idol of the entire South, exalted yet further by the magnificent position of his father-in-law, passed First President of the Court of Cassation since the fall of the Empire, Numa was evidently destined to become a minister one day or other.

CHAPTER IV

AUNT PORTAL

PORTAL HOUSE, in which the great man of Aps lodges during his sojourns in Provence, is reckoned among the curiosities of the place. It figures in the guide-books with the temple of Juno, the amphitheatre, the old theatre, the tower of the Antonines, ancient remains of Roman rule of which the town is very proud. But it is not a great heavy door of the old provincial house embossed with huge nails, nor the windows barred with bristling spikes that strangers are asked to admire; only the balcony on the first floor, a narrow balcony with iron railings over the porch. From there Roumestan speaks and exhibits himself to the crowd when he arrives, and as the whole town could bear witness the orator's heavy fist it is that has given those capricious curves to the balcony which was once straight as a yard measure.

"*Té! Vé!*—he's bent the iron."

They tell you that, with their eyes staring out of their heads, with a rolling of the r's, which does not allow a shadow of a doubt.

The race is proud in the land of Aps and good-natured ; but with a vivacity of impressions and intemperance of language of which Aunt Portal, a true type of the local *bourgeoisie*, can give a distinct idea. Enormous in size, apoplectic, with all her blood flowing into her flaccid purple cheeks, which are contrasted with her skin, which is that of one who was a blond, imposing and majestic in appearance, with an agreeable smile, such is a first impression of Madame Portal in the twilight of her drawing-room which is always hermetically closed, in Southern fashion. You would say she was like a family portrait, an old Marquise de Mirabeau, well suited to the old house built a hundred years before by Gonzague Portal, leading Councillor at the Parliament of Aix.

But if when talking with the aunt you unhappily claim that Protestants are as good as Catholics, or that Henri V is not near to ascending the throne, the old portrait dashes violently from its frame, and with the swollen veins of her neck, her irritated hands deranging her carefully-ordered frills and furbelows, it yields to a frightful outburst of rage mingled with abuse, threats, curses, one of those rages that are notorious in the town.

In any other spot in the world she would have been treated as a madwoman, but in Aps, a land of hotheads, they agree to find Madame Portal "hasty tempered." In the long run an excellent person, passionate, generous, with that need of pleasing, of giving herself, which is one of the sides of the race and of which Numa had experi-

enced the benefits. Since his nomination as deputy the house in the Place Cavalerie belonged to him, his aunt reserving to herself merely the right to live in it till her death. And what a fête for her was the arrival of her Parisians, the festivities, the serenades, the receptions, the visits with which the visits of the great man filled her life greedy of exuberance. Then she adored her niece Rosalie with all the contrast of their two natures, with all the respect imposed on her by the daughter of President Le Quesnoy, the first magistrate of France.

And truly the young wife had need of a singular indulgence of that family cult which she had from her parents to endure for two long months the fancies, the wearying surprises of that disordered, always over-excited imagination which was as active as the gross body was idle. Luckily, Rosalie through living with her Numa was accustomed to such frenzies of speech, she hardly asked herself how it was that she, reserved, discreet as she was, had been found able to enter such a family of comedians, draped with phrases, overflowing with gestures; and the story had to be very "strong" for her to interrupt by absent-mindedly exclaiming, "Oh! aunt."

"Yes, you're right, my little one. I'm perhaps exaggerating a bit."

It was a Friday morning during lunch, a Southern lunch, fresh and gay to the eye, but rigorously in keeping with the fast, for Aunt Portal was a martinet in such matters. In the middle of the table two splendid cutlets for Numa were smoking

on a hot plate. Although his name was blest in the congregations, mingled with all their prayers, or perhaps even because of that fact, the great man of Aps alone of the family had a dispensation from fasting from Monseigneur, and serenely cut up the underdone meat with his strong hands, without troubling about his wife and sister-in-law, who, like Aunt Portal, were making do with figs and water melons. Rosalie was accustomed to it, the orthodox fasting two days a week, as a part of her annual burden, like the sun, the dust, the mistral of the South, the stories of the aunt and the services on Sunday at Sainte-Perpétue. Hortense, however, began to revolt with all the strength of her young stomach, and it needed the authority of the elder sister to close the mouth of the spoilt child, which would have upset all Madame Portal's ideas regarding the education, the proper conduct of young ladies. The girl contented herself with eating what was before her, rolling her eyes in a comical way, expanding her nostrils despairingly towards Roumestan's cutlet, and murmuring in a low tone for Rosalie's benefit—

“What luck!—I've just been riding this morning.—I'm as hungry as a traveller.”

She still had on her riding habit, which fitted well her long supple figure, as the little collar suited her piquant, irregular features enlivened by the riding in the open air. And her morning promenade having given her a taste for an excursion—

“Apropos, Numa—And Valmajour, when are we going to see him?”

"Who's that, Valmajour?" asked Roumestan, whose fickle brain had already forgotten the tambourinist. "*Té*, of course, Valmajour—I wasn't thinking of him; what an artist!"

He saw again the arena and the people dancing the farandole to the dull rhythm of the tambourine which excited him in the memory of it. And with sudden decision:—

"Aunt Portal, lend us the berlin—we're going off after lunch."

The aunt frowned like a Japanese idol.

"The berlin—*avai!*—And what are you going to do?—At any rate, I hope you're not going to take your ladies to this *tutu-panpan* player."

The words "*tutu-panpan*" rendered the double instrument, fife and tabour, so well, that Roumestan began laughing. But Hortense took up the cudgels for the old Provençal tabour with much briskness. Of all she had seen in the South, that had especially impressed her. Besides, it would not be right to break one's word with that fine fellow. "A great artist, Numa—you said so yourself!"

"Yes, yes, you're right, little sister—we must go there!"

Aunt Portal, suffocated with indignation, could not understand how a man like her nephew, a deputy, should put himself out for common peasants, people who played on the flute from father to son at village fêtes. Absorbed in her idea, she scoffingly mimicked the musician's gestures, her fingers extended on an imaginary flute, whilst her other hand tapped on the table.

Nice sort of people to show to young ladies!—No, it was only that Numa.—Go to the Valmajours! good holy Mother of Angels!—And, growing excited, she began to charge them with every crime, to make of them a family of monsters, notorious and blood-thirsty as the Trestailon family, when she perceived, on the other side of the table, Ménicle, who belonged to the Valmajour country and was listening opposite her, his features all distorted with amazement. Immediately she ordered him in a fearful voice to “go and change” quickly, and have the berlin ready at a quarter to two. All the aunt’s fits of choler ended in the same fashion.

Hortense threw down her napkin and ran and kissed the fat woman on both cheeks. She was laughing, jumping with delight: “Let’s hurry, Rosalie.”

Aunt Portal looked at her niece—

“Ah ça! Rosalie! I hope you’re not going on trip with these children?”

“No, no, aunt—I’ll remain with you,” answered the young wife, smiling at the rôle of elderliness which her indefatigable obligingness, her loving resignation had finally bestowed on her in the house.

At the appointed hour, Ménicle was ready; but he was let go in advance, the rendezvous being fixed at the Place des Arènes, and Roumestan set off on foot with his sister-in-law, who was curious and proud to see Aps, leaning on the arm of the great man, the house where he was born, to recall with him in the streets the memories of his early childhood and youth.

It was the hour of siesta. The town was asleep, deserted and silent, rocked by the mistral, blowing great gusts, aerating, vivifying the warm summer of Provence, but making walking hard, especially along the *Cours*, where there was nothing to check it, where it could rush whirling, encircling the small city with its howls as of a bull let loose.

They chatted together, following a labyrinth of dark, oriental streets, where old women were sleeping on their doorsteps, other streets less gloomy, but crossed in their breadth by big, flapping strips of printed calico bearing such signs as: *Grocers, linen-drapers, bootmakers*; and so they reached what is called at Aps the Placette, a square of asphalt melting beneath the sun, surrounded by shops now shut and mute. An unfinished monument adorned the centre of the Placette. As Hortense wanted to know what was going to be set on the white marble Roumestan smiled in some embarrassment—

“It’s a long story!” said he, hastening on.

The municipality of Aps had voted him a statue, but the Liberals of the *Avant-garde* having severely censured such an apotheosis of a living person, his friends had not dared to go on with it. The statue was quite ready; people were waiting probably for his death to set it up. The empty pediment, gleaming in the sun, gave Roumestan, whenever he passed it, the feeling of a stately family tomb, and the sight of the amphitheatre was needed to draw him from his funereal thoughts. The old building, vacant of Sunday’s noisy animation, restored to its solemnity as a

useless, grandiose ruin, displayed through the serried openings its broad, damp, cold corridors.

"How cheerless it is!" cried Hortense, regretting Valmajour's tambourine; but it was not cheerless for Numa. His childhood had there lived its best hours in delights and desires. Oh! the bull-fights on Sundays, the lounging about the railings with other children poor as himself, who who had not ten *sous* for a ticket. In the burning sun of the afternoon, the mirage of forbidden pleasure, they looked at the little they could see between the heavy walls, the corner of the circus, the legs of the toreros encased in loud-coloured stockings, the furious onslaughts of the animal, the dust of the combat. The desire of going in was too strong for them; accordingly the boldest watched for a moment when the sentinel was going away; and they slipped with some little effort between two of the bars.

"As for me, I always used to get through," said Roumestan expressively. His life's whole story was summed up in those two words: whether it was due to chance or skill, however narrow the opening might be, the Southerner had always got through.

"It's all the same now," he added sighing, "I was thinner than I am to-day." And his glance passed with an expression of comic regret from the narrow railings of the arches to the broad white waistcoat, which testified decisively to his more than forty years.

Behind the huge monument the berlin was awaiting them, sheltered from the wind and sun.

They had to wake up Ménicle who was asleep on his seat between two baskets of provisions in his heavy livery of royal blue. Hortense, who began to fear they would never get out of the town where the great man discovered some eloquent memory in every stone, urged him gently into the berlin—

“Let’s get in, Numa—we should talk quite as well on the way.”

CHAPTER V

VALMAJOUR

IT hardly takes more than two hours to go from Aps to the Mont de Cordoue. Drawn by its two old Camargues horses the berlin went along quite by itself, pushed by the mistral which shook it, lifted it up, dented the leather of its hood or swelled it like a sail. Here it no longer roared as it did round the ramparts, but free, unshackled, driving before the immense undulating plain, where a few isolated farms, all grey in a green setting, seemed the scattering of a village by the tempest, it passed as mist over the sky, as a swift darkness on the tall grains, on the fields of olive trees, whose silver leaves it shook in a dance, and in great gusts that raised light floods of dust that crackled beneath the wheels; it lowered the heads of close-grown cypresses, the Spanish reeds with long wavy leaves giving the illusion of a fresh streamlet by the side of the road. When it was hushed for a minute as if short of breath, you felt the burden of summer, an African heat, coming from the sun, which very speedily dissipated the healthy, vivifying whirlwind that

extended its merry progress to the furthest point of the horizon, towards those small greyish hills which are found at the back of every Provençal landscape which the setting sun irises with fairy hues.

They did not meet many people. At long intervals a carter coming from the quarries with a cargo of enormous blocks of stones, blinding in the sunlight, an old peasant woman of the Ville-des-Baux bent beneath a great load of aromatic herbs, a mendicant friar, wallet on back, rosary hanging by his thigh, his skull sweating and glistening, or a carriage full of women and girls returning from a pilgrimage in full dress, with fine black eyes, big chignons, bright fluttering ribbons, coming from La Sainte-Baume or from Notre-Dame de-Lumière.

"*Hé ! Ménicle !—Ménicle——*"

"Monsieur Numa ?"

"What is that building down there on the other side of the road ?"

"That, Monsieur Numa, is the dungeon of Queen Jeanne."

"Ah, yes, that's true—I remember."

He then related to Hortense the story of the royal dungeon, for he was thoroughly at home in Provençal legends—and working himself into excitement, forgetting that his only audience was his sister-in-law and Ménicle's blue livery, he soared into one of those ingenious and brilliant improvisations, which truly made him a descendant of the Provençal trouvères.

"There's Valmajour !" suddenly said Aunt

Portal's coachman, bending back to show them the height with the end of his whip.

They had left the high road and were following the zig-zag narrow path up the sides of the Mont de Cordoue, slippery because of the tufts of lavender whose perfume was exhaled at every turn of the wheel. On a plateau, half-way up the hill at the foot of a ruined black tower, the roofs of the farm were to be seen. The Valmajours had lived there from father to son for years and years, on the site of the old castle whose name had remained to them. And who knows? Perhaps those peasants were actually descended from the princes of Valmajour who were allied to the Counts of Provence and the house of Baux. This hypothesis imprudently suggested by Roumestan was altogether to Hortense's liking, who thus explained to herself the really noble manners and mien of the tabour-player.

As they talked about it in the carriage Ménicle on his seat listened to them in stupefaction. The name of Valmajour was widely spread in the district. "So they would be at that rate all of them *grands seigneurs!*" But the astute Provençal kept his observation to himself. And whilst they were slowly advancing into this bare rugged country, the girl upon whom Roumestan's lively conversation had cast the spell of a historical novel in its coloured dream of the past, perceiving up above a peasant woman, seated at the foot of the ruins, half turned to look at them arriving, with her hand over her eyes, imagined she saw some Princess on the summit of her tower.

The illusion scarcely ceased when the travellers, getting out of the carriage, found themselves face to face with the tabour-player's sister, who was busily engaged in plaiting osier twigs for the silkworms. She did not rise, though Ménicle had cried to her from far off: "*Vê!* Audiberte, here are some visitors for your brother." Her clever, regular, oval face, dark as an olive, showed neither joy nor surprise, retained the concentrated expression that knotted her thick, straight, black eyebrows, under her obstinate forehead, as with a very tight band. Roumestan, rather taken aback by her reserve, introduced himself—

"Numa Roumestan—the deputy."

"Oh! I know you well," she said gravely, and leaving her work beside her in a heap: "Come in for a moment—my brother will be here soon."

When she stood up, the mistress of the castle lost prestige. Very short, her figure entirely developed in bust only, she walked awkwardly, inharmoniously with her pretty head, which was finely set off by the small Arles cap and the broad muslin *fichu* with bluish folds. They went in. This peasant abode had a fine appearance, leaning against a ruined tower, with a coat-of-arms in the stone over the gate. Two or three images, the Saints Mary, Martha and La Tarasque, the red copper of a small, antique lamp, with the salt-cellar and the flour-box on each side of the chimney-piece, completed the adornment of the huge room. The long table was spread lengthways, flanked by benches and chaplets of onions hung

from the ceiling, all black with flies which buzzed about whenever the door was opened.

"Refresh yourselves, monsieur, madame—pray, have the *grand-boire* with us."

The "*grand-boire*" is the appetizer of the Provincial peasants. It is served in the fields, even at the place of work, under some tree, in the shade of a mill, in the hollow of a ditch. Valmajour and his father, however, who worked quite near, on their property, came home to have it. And the table was already awaiting them, with two or three little yellow plates, preserved olives, and a *salade de romaine* glistening with oil. In the osier basket in which the bottle and glasses were placed, Roumestan thought he saw wine.

"So you have still vines here?" he inquired in an affable way, trying to tame the strange little savage woman. But at the word "vines," she at once leapt up and her voice sounded in a diapason of fury. Vines! Ah! yes, fine vines!—Plenty of them!—They could only save one out of five, the smallest, and even that they had to keep under water six months in the year. And whose fault was all that? The fault of the Reds, those pigs, those monsters of Reds and their republic without religion which had let loose hell-abominations on the country.

As she talked with such passion, her eyes became blacker, with a murderous black, her pretty face was convulsed and grimacing, her mouth contorted, the knot of her eyebrows drawn tight so as to make a big fold in the middle of her forehead. The funniest part of it was that she con-

pécairé! He managed the property, toiled, pruned the vines, as his father was not strong enough. What should they do if he went? All alone in Paris, he would grow homesick. And his money, his 200 francs a day, what would he do with it in that big town?—Her voice grew hard as she spoke of that money, whose keeping she would not have, which she would not be able to shut up in the lowest of her drawers?

"Well, then," said Roumestan, "come to Paris with him."

"And the house?"

"Let it, sell it—when you return, you'll buy a finer one."

Upon an uneasy look from Hortense he stopped, and as if remorseful at disturbing the repose of these worthy people—

"After all, you're happy as you are."

Audiberte broke in vivaciously: "Oh! happy! Life is very hard! It's not as it once was." She began again to groan about the vines, the silk-worms, the vanished wealth of the district. They had to work like satyrs.—True, they had in the future expectations from Cousin Puyfourcat, who had been in Algeria thirty years as a colonist, but Algeria is so far away in Africa. And all at once the astute little person, in order to excite again the enthusiasm of "*Moussu Numa*," which she reproached herself for having chilled rather too much, told her brother felinely, in her caressing, singing tones—

"*Qué, Valmajour*, suppose you gave us a little tune to please this beautiful young lady?"

Ah! the cunning rogue! She was not mistaken. At the first beat of the stick, at the first trill, Roumestan was again captivated and rapturous. The young man played in front of the farm, leaning on the edge of an old well, whose arched iron railings, entangled in a wild fig-tree, wonderfully framed his elegant figure and dark complexion. His arms bare, his chest open, in his dusty working dress, he looked even somewhat prouder and nobler than in the arena, when his grace was stiffened by a theatrical artificiality. And the old tunes of the rustic instrument, poetized by the silence and solitude of a fine landscape, awakening the gilded ruins from their stone sleep, flew like larks over those stately inclines, all grey with lavender or variegated with grain, with dead vines, with large-leaved mulberries, whose shadows began to lengthen as it became lighter. The wind had fallen. The setting sun was flaming on the violet line of the Alpilles, was casting into the hollow of the rocks a mirage of pools of liquid porphyry, of molten gold, and a luminous vibration on the whole horizon, the tense chords of a burning lyre, the sounds of which seemed to be the continuous song of the grasshoppers and the beats of the tabour.

Hortense, sitting in meek rapture on the parapet of the ancient dungeon, listened and admired, gave rein to her romantic little head, full of the legends gathered during the journey. She saw the old castle arising from its decay, lifting up its towers, its cloister-like arches peopled with lovely ladies of that pale complexion which great heat does not

affect. She herself was a Princess des Baux ; and the musician who was serenading her was a prince also, the last of the Valmajour, in peasant's attire.

" *Adona*, the song is ended," as they say in the chronicles of the courts of love ; and she broke off a spray of pomegranate over her head, to which hung a heavy, bright purple flower, and handed it as a reward for his serenade to the handsome musician, who gallantly tied it to the strings of his tambour.

CHAPTER VI

MINISTER I

THREE months have passed since the trip to the Mont de Cordoue.

Parliament has just opened at Versailles amid a November deluge which unites the fountain basins of the park with the low, foggy sky, envelops the Chambers with damp gloom and darkness, but does not cool political animosities. The session promises to be a terrible one. Train-loads of deputies, of senators, cross, follow, whistle, groan, shake their threatening smoke, animated in their own way with the hates and intrigues they are bearing along under torrents of rain ; and, during that hour of travelling, the discussions go on with the same bitterness, the same fury as in the tribune. The most excited, the noisiest of all, is Roumestan. He has already made two speeches since the Chambers have met again. He speaks in the committee-rooms, in the passages, at the station, at the refreshment bars, shakes the glass roofs of the photographic saloons in which all the Rights are assembled. You can only see his moving, heavy silhouette, his big head, his broad

shoulders which are feared by the ministry whom he is about to "throw" according to the rules, like a supple, vigorous wrestler of the South. Ah ! the blue sky, the tabours, the grasshoppers, all the bright scenery of his holidays, how far away it is ! Numa does not think of it one moment, absorbed in the whirl of his double life as barrister and politician ; for, like his old master Sagnier, he did not give up the Courts when he entered the Chamber ; and every evening, from 6 to 8, there is a crowd at the door of his room in the Rue Scribe.

the créole South, boastful, adventurous, keen at duelling and escapades. Five years of Paris, 100,000 francs gambled away at the club and paid for with his mother's diamonds, have given him the genuine accent of the boulevard. Quite different is the Viscount Charlexis de Rochemaure, a compatriot of Numa, brought up among the Pères de l'Assomption, who studied law in the provinces under the care of his mother and an abbé, and retained from his upbringing a certain candour, shyness that contrasted with his Louis XIII beard, his appearance at once refined and *Jocrisse*.

The tall Lappara tries to initiate the young Pourceaugnac into Parisian life. He teaches him to dress, what is "good form" and what is not, to walk with his head stretched forward, his mouth stiffened up, to sit down in one piece, with his legs extended so as not to crease his breeches at the knee. He would like him to get rid of his *naïve* belief in men and things, his taste for scribbling. But no, the Viscount likes his work, and when Roumestan does not take him to the Chamber or the Palais, he remains writing for hours at the long table installed for the secretaries beside the master's cabinet. Lappara, smoking a cigar, with his legs outstretched, is looking through the rain at the long line of carriages drawn up at the pavement for Mme. Roumestan's Thursday.

What a lot of people! And that is not all; there are still carriages arriving. Lappara, who boasts he knows his Paris by heart, announces: "The Duchess de San Donnino—Marquis de Belle-

garde—*maschle* ! The Mau-conseils also ! *Ah ça !* what's up ? ”

Méjean had suddenly arrived from the Palais, quite out of breath.

“ Great news ! ” he cried, throwing his portfolio on the table. “ The ministry is beaten.”

“ You don't mean to say so ! ”

“ Roumestan takes the Ministry of Public Instruction.”

Roumestan a Minister !

“ Ah ! my dear fellow, what a rascal he is ! ” repeated the tall Lappara, slipping down in his armchair till his legs touched the ceiling. “ He knows how to play the game ! ”

Rochemaure was scandalised.

“ Don't let's be malicious, my dear sir.—Roumestan is a conscience. He goes right ahead like a bullet.”

“ To begin with, my little man, there are no longer any bullets. There are only shells.—And shells go like this.”

He showed the trajectory with the tip of his boot.

“ Fool ! ”

“ Idiot ! ”

“ Gentlemen—gentlemen——”

And Méjean reflected to himself on the singular nature of this complex Roumestan, who, even when viewed from quite near, could be judged so differently.

“ A rascal ” ; “ a conscience.”

The public were similarly divided in opinion. He, who knew him best, knew what depths of levity and idleness modified this ambitious tempera-

ment which was both better and worse than its reputation. But was the news of the portfolio true? Curious to be assured of it, Méjean glanced at his dress in a glass and crossed over to Madame Roumestan's.

In the ante-chamber, where the footmen were waiting, with fur cloaks on their arms, a murmur of voices could be perceived dulled by the high ceilings, the heavy luxury of the hangings. As a rule Rosalie received in the small drawing-room, furnished as a winter garden with light seats, dainty tables, the daylight penetrating between the glistening leaves of the green plants near the windows. But to-day the two reception rooms were crowded; and people were continuously arriving, friends and acquaintances, faces to which Rosalie could not have given a name.

Very simple, in a shot violet dress which showed off well her *svelte* figure, the elegant harmony of her whole being, she welcomed every one with the same rather haughty smile, the chilly air of which Aunt Portal once spoke. Not the least bedazzlement at her new good fortune, some surprise and uneasiness rather, which, however, did not betray itself in everything. She was busy among the various groups, whilst the sun was rapidly setting in this Parisian first floor, and the servants brought lamps, lit the chandeliers, so that the room appeared as it did on evening fêtes with its rich glittering stuffs, its oriental carpets coloured like jewels.

"Ah! Monsieur Méjean——" Rosalie freed herself for a moment, went to meet him,

happy in an intimacy discovered amid the society horde. Their natures understood each other.

"I came to assure myself if the news was true—I no longer doubt now," he said, pointing to the full rooms. She handed him the telegram she had received from her husband. And she whispered: "What do you say to it?"

"It's a burdensome post, but you will be there."

"And you too," she said, shaking his hands and leaving him for fresh visitors. Nobody went away. They were waiting for their Leader, they wanted to hear from his lips the details of the meeting, how he had upset them all with a shrug of the shoulders. Some of the new-comers were already reporting some rumours from the Chamber, some tit-bits of speeches. There was a stir, a pleasing excitement around them. The women especially appeared inquisitive, passionate; beneath the big hats that were in fashion that winter, their pretty faces had that light pink fire, that fever on the cheeks which is seen on those of the players of *trente-et-quarante* at Monte Carlo. They all seemed very strong in politics, they celebrated the glory of Roumestan, and there was on all hands the same cry: "What a man! What a man!"

In one corner, old Béchut, Professor at the Collège de France, very ugly, all nose, a huge scientific nose spreading over his lips, took Roumestan's success as a text for propounding one of his favourite theses: that the weakness of the modern world comes from position held in it by women and children. Seeing people approaching to listen, he raised his voice, quoted historical examples,

Cæsar, Richelieu, Frederick, Napoleon, proved scientifically that woman was several stages below man as a thinking being. "In fact, if we examine the cellular tissues——"

Suddenly Roumestan came in. In the midst of loud welcomings he quickly crossed the *salon*, went straight to his wife, kissed her on the cheeks before she was able to prevent the somewhat embarrassing manifestation, which however emphatically belied the assertions of her physiologist. All the ladies exclaimed: "Bravo!" There was again an exchange of handshakes, effusive greetings, then an attentive silence whilst the Leader, leaning on the chimney-piece, began a rapid account of the day.

The great *coup* prepared during the week, the marches and counter-marches, the mad rage of the Left at the moment of defeat, his own triumph, his amazing invasion of the tribune, even to the tones of his fine answer to the Marshal: "That depends on you, Monsieur le Président,"—he remarked on everything, detailed everything with a communicative gaiety and warmth. Next, he became grave, reckoned up the heavy responsibilities of his office: the University to be reformed, the youth to be prepared for the realization of the great hopes—the phrase was understood, greeted with applause—but he would surround himself with enlightened men, would appeal to all good-will and devotion. And, with a moistened eye, he looked round the circle crowded about him: "I shall appeal to my friend Béchut—to you also, my dear de Bœe."

The hour was so solemn that nobody asked how University reform could be thus served. For the rest, the number of persons of that calibre, whom Roumestan that afternoon had begged to collaborate with him in the terrible duties of public instruction, was truly incalculable. As for the fine arts, he felt more at his ease, and doubtless they would not refuse him—A flattering murmur of laughter, of interjections, prevented his continuing. There was but one opinion in Paris, even among the most hostile. Numa was the man for the post. At length they were about to have a jury, lyric theatres, an official art. But the minister cut short the dithyrambs and observed in a familiar jocular way, that the new cabinet was almost entirely composed of Southerners. Out of eight ministers, the Bordeaux, the Périgord, the Languedoc districts had furnished six. And growing excited: "Ah! the South is rising, the South is rising—Paris belongs to us. We hold everything. Take your choice, Messieurs. For the second time, the Latins have conquered Gaul."

He was indeed himself a Latin of the conquest, with his sculpturesque head, broad cheeks and warm complexion, and his rough, easy-going manner that were out of place in so Parisian a *salon*. Amid the laughter and applause raised by his last *mot*, he left the chimney-piece quickly like a good comedian who knows how to retire after making his point, beckoned to Méjean to follow, and disappeared by one of the interior doors, leaving Rosalie to make his excuses. He was dining at Versailles, with the Marshal; he

had hardly the time left to get ready, to write a few signatures.

"Come and dress me," he said to the servant who was about to lay the three covers for monsieur, madame and Bompard, around the basket of flowers, fresh every day, which Rosalie liked on the table at every meal. He felt quite pleased at not dining there. The tumult of enthusiasm he had left at his heels extended behind the closed door, encouraged him to seek yet more people and illuminations. And besides, the Southerner is not a home man. It is the people of the North, the poor climates who have invented "home," the intimacy of the family circle to which Provence and Italy prefer the terraces of ice-shops, the noise and excitement of the street.

Between the dining-room and the barrister's study, a small ante-room had to be crossed, usually full of people at that hour, of restless folk watching the clock, with their eyes on the illustrated papers, whilst absorbed in the preoccupations of legal proceedings. Méjean had dismissed them that evening, rightly thinking Numa could not give any consultations. Still, a person had remained behind, a tall young man, dressed up in ready-made clothes, awkward as a non-commissioned officer dressed as a civilian.

"*Hé !* good-day—Monsieur Roumestan—how are you ?—I've been hoping to see you for some time."

Numa remembered well having come across that accent, that dark complexion, that conceitedly triumphant expression somewhere, but where ?

"Don't you know me?" asked the other—"Valmajour, the tabour-player!"

"Ah! yes, very well—perfectly."

He was about to go on. But Valmajour barred his way, saying he had arrived the evening before. "Only, you know, I couldn't come earlier. When a man transports a whole family like that into a country he doesn't know, it's difficult to settle down."

"A whole family?" inquired Roumestan, with wide-open eyes.

"*Bé!* yes, my father, sister—we've done what you said."

Numa made an embarrassed, angry gesture, as he did whenever he was confronted with one of his bills to pay, which he had taken up enthusiastically, out of a need to speak, to give, to be agreeable. *Mon Dieu!* He wanted nothing better than to help such a fine fellow. He would look out for the means. But he was very pressed that evening. Exceptional circumstances. The favour with which the Chief of the State—Seeing that the peasant did not go off, he said quickly: "Come into the cabinet"—and they passed in.

Whilst sitting at the bureau, he hastily read and signed several letters. Valmajour gazed at the huge room sumptuously carpeted and furnished, the library going round it, surmounted by bronzes, busts, works of art, souvenirs of glorious cases, the King's portrait signed with a few lines, and he felt impressed by the solemnity of the place, the stiffness of the sculptured seats, the quantity of books, especially by the presence of the footman,

correct, dressed in black, coming and going, carefully laying suits and clean linen on arm chairs. However, in the lamp's warm shadow, Roumestan's kindly broad face, his well-known profile reassured him a trifle. The great man next passed into his valet's hands, and with his leg extended for the drawing off of his trousers and boots, he questioned the tabour-player, learnt with terror that before coming the Valmajours had sold everything, the mulberries, the vines, the farm.

"Sold the farm, you unfortunate man !"

"Ah ! my sister was a bit frightened at it. But the papa and I insisted on it. As I said : What risk is there, when Numa is at hand, as it was he who told us to come ?"

He had need of all his innocence to dare to speak of the minister, in his presence, in that unceremonious way. But that was not what most struck Roumestan. He pondered on the numerous enemies he had already procured himself by his incorrigible mania for promising. Why go and trouble the lives of these poor people ? And the smallest details of his visit to the Mont de Cordoue came back to him, the opposition of the peasant girl, his decisive phrases. Why ? What demon had he within him ? He was dreadful, that rustic ! As for his talent, Numa hardly recollected it, seeing only what a burden he had laid on himself.

He heard beforehand his wife's reproaches, felt the cold of her severe look. "Words mean something." And in his new position, at the source of all favours, how much embarrassment he was

going to create for himself by his fatal goodwill.

The idea, however, that he was a minister, the consciousness of his power almost immediately reassured him. Can these follies still preoccupy one at such heights? As sovereign master at the Beaux-Arts, with all the theatres to his hand, it would cost him nothing to help this poor man. Having recovered his self-esteem, he changed his tone with the countryman, and in order to prevent his familiarity he solemnly informed him in a very loud voice of the important dignities to which he had been raised that morning. Unfortunately, at that moment he was half-dressed, standing in his silk socks on the carpet, with his stomach prominent in the white flannel of a pink-ribboned hose; and Valmajour did not seem to be moved, the magic word "minister" not being connected in his mind with this fat man in shirt sleeves. He went on calling him "Moussu Numa," spoke to him of his "music," of the new tunes he had learnt. Ah! he wasn't afraid now of one of the Parisian tambourinists!

"You wait—you'll see."

He darted out to take up his tambourine in the ante-room. But Roumestan held him back:

"But I tell you I am pressed for time, *qué diable!*"

"All right—all right—it'll do for another time," said the peasant with his good-natured air.

And, seeing Méjean approaching, he thought he ought to tell the story of his three-holed flute for his wonder:—

"It occurred to me one night, as I listened to

the nightingale singing. I thought within myself : What ! Valmajour——”

It was the same tale he had told at the amphitheatre. He had remembered it word for word. But this time he told it with a certain shy hesitation, an emotion increasing from minute to minute, as he saw Roumestan being transformed before him under a broad shirt front of fine linen with pearl buttons, the black dress of severe cut which the valet handed him.

At the time, “ Moussu Numa ” seemed to him to have grown. His head, which his endeavour not to derange the knot of white muslin made stiff and solemn, was lit up by the pale reflections of the great cordon of Sainte-Anne round his neck, and the broad plaque of Isabella the Catholic. And suddenly the peasant, struck with a great, frightened respect, at last understood he had before him one of the privileged of the earth, that mysterious, almost chimerical being, the powerful idol, towards whom prayers, wishes, desires, entreaties, are only extended on large sheets of paper, so high that the lowly never see him, so proud that they never utter his name but in a whisper, with a sort of reverent fear and ignorant emphasis : “ The Minister ! ”

He was so put out by it, poor Valmajour, that he scarce heard the kindly words with which Roumestan dismissed him, asking him to call again in a fortnight, when he was installed at the ministry.

“ All right—all right, Monsieur le Ministre.”

He regained the door, stepping backwards, dazzled by the brilliance of the official Orders and

the extraordinary expression of the transfigured Numa. The latter was much flattered by the sudden timidity which gave him a high opinion of what he henceforth termed "his ministerial air "

CHAPTER VII

THE PASSAGE DU SAUMON

WHILST waiting to set up housekeeping on a more complete scale, which could only take place after the arrival of their furniture which was on the way by baggage train, the Valmajours had put up in the renowned Passage du Saumon, where travellers from Aps and the district had put up at all times. They occupied there under the roof a room and a cabinet, the latter being without light or air, a sort of coffer in which the two men slept, the room being scarcely bigger, but it appeared splendid to them with its mahogany, its worn hangings, and its attic window cutting off a portion of the sky as yellow, as foggy as the long plate-glass at the entrance of the Passage. In this *niche* they kept up their country's memory by a strong odour of garlic and onions, cooking their exotic food themselves on a small stove. Old Valmajour being a great *gourmand*, loving company, would have preferred to descend to the table d'hôte, whose white linen and plated cruets warmed his enthusiasm, to enter into the noisy conversation of the commercial travellers

they heard laughing at meal-times even as high as their fifth floor. The little Provençale, however, definitely opposed it.

Exceedingly astonished at not finding on their arrival that Numa's fine promises had been realised namely, the 200 francs a night which, since the visit of the Parisians, caused her little imaginative head to swim in a pile of amassed gold, frightened by the exorbitant price of everything, she had been seized on the first day with that panic which the Paris crowd calls "the fear of failure." Had she been alone, with some anchovies and olives, she would have got out of the mess, but her men had wolves' teeth, much longer here than in the country because it was less warm, and she had at every turn to open her money-bag, in which rang the 3,000 francs, the product of the sale of their property. With each louis she changed, there was a struggle, a wrench, as if she were parting with the stones of her farm, the fruit of the last vine.

Never did a traveller lost in a haunted wood cling to his valise more energetically than she to her money-bag, when she was crossing the road with her green skirt, her Arles coif, at which passers-by turned back to glance when she went into the shops, where her out-of-the-way names for things made her, a French woman of the South, as bewildered, as much a stranger in the capital of France, as if she had come from Stockholm or Nijni-Novgorod.

At first very humble in manner, soft in tone, she would at times, when some shopman was

scoffing or brutal, suddenly have fits of fury which found vent in convulsions of her pretty brown face, in the gestures of a madwoman, in a chattering quarrelsome vanity. And then out would come the story of cousin Puyfourcat and his legacy, the 200 francs a night, their patron Roumestan of whom she spoke, disposed of as something belonging entirely to her, calling him now Numa, now the "minister," all this would be outpoured, till the moment when, mistrust taking the upper hand again, the peasant would stop, attacked by a superstitious fear at her own talkativeness, suddenly dumbstruck, her lips tight-shut like the strings of her money-bag.

At the end of a week she became a stock figure at that entry of the Rue Montmartre, all fitted with shops, spreading through their open doors the life and secrets of the houses of the quarter, together with the odours of vegetables, fresh meat or colonial produce. And it was that—the questions mockingly put to her in the morning when she got the change for her slender purchases, the allusions to her brother's constantly delayed *début*, to the Bedouin's heritage, those wounds to self-love yet more than the fear of poverty, that excited Audiberte against Numa, against those promises of which she was at first rightly mistrustful, like a true daughter of the South where words fly quicker than elsewhere, through the lightness of the air.

"Ah ! if he had been made to draw up a paper."

It had become her fixed idea, and every morning, when Valmajour set off for the ministry, she took

great care to see that the perforated sheet was in the pocket of his overcoat.

But Roumestan had other papers to sign besides that, other business in his head than the tabour. He was installed at the ministry, with the bustle, the fever of upset, the generous ardours of people taking possession. Everything was new to him, the vast rooms of the administrative *hôtel* as well as the broadened views of his lofty post. To reach the first rank, "to conquer Gaul," as he said, was not the difficult task; but to maintain himself, to justify his good luck by intelligent reforms, attempts at progress! Full of zeal, he gathered information, consulted, conferred, surrounded himself with shining lights of knowledge. With Béchut, the eminent professor, he studied the faults of university education, the methods of extirpating the Voltairean spirit of the *lycées*; helped himself by the experience of his *Chargé* of the Beaux-Arts, M. de la Calmette, who had been twenty-nine years in the office; of Cadaillac, the Director of the Opera, who had survived three bankruptcies, to reconstruct the Conservatoire, the Salon, the Académie de Musique, on new plans.

The worst was that he did not listen to these gentlemen, talked for hours, and suddenly, looking at his watch, got up, dismissed them hurriedly—

"The deuce! And I was forgetting the Council. What a life, not a second to oneself. Very good, dear friend. Send me your report soon."

The reports were piled up on Méjean's bureau, who, despite his intelligence and good-will, had not

too much time to spare for current business, and let the great reforms slumber.

Like all ministers just appointed, Roumestan had brought his people with him, the brilliant *personnel* of the Rue Scribe: the Baron de Lappara, the Viscount de Rochemaure, who gave the new cabinet an aristocratic flavour, though for the rest they were quite at sea and ignorant in every question. The first time Valmajour presented himself at the Rue de Grenelle, he was received by Lappara, who was more particularly busied with the Fine Arts, sending at all hours staff messengers, dragoons, cuirassiers, to take the young ladies of the minor theatres invitations to supper in big official envelopes. M. le Baron greeted the tabour-player good-humouredly, rather haughtily, like a great lord receiving one of his tenants. With his legs extended for fear of spoiling his French blue trousers, he spoke to him without stopping polishing, filing his nails.

"Very difficult at the moment. The minister so busy. Soon, in a few days. You will be informed, my good man."

And when the musician naïvely confessed it was a matter of some urgency, that their resources would not last for ever, M. le Baron, speaking with his most serious air, put him off with a joke.

The next time, Valmajour had to do with the Viscount de Rochemaure. He raised his curled head from a dusty book in which it had quite vanished, had explained to him conscientiously the mechanism of the flute, took notes, tried to understand, and finally declared that he was more

specially concerned with the religious sections. Then the poor peasant found nobody in, as the whole cabinet had gone to attend the Minister in the inaccessible regions where His Excellency took shelter. Still, he lost neither coolness nor courage; to the evasive replies of ushers and their shrugs of shoulders he always opened bright, astonished eyes of raillery—

“All right. All right. I’ll come back.”

And he returned. Had it not been for his gaiters and his instrument, he might have been taken for an employee of the house, so regular was his arrival there, though more painful each morning.

The mere sight of the high door now made his heart beat. Yet, he feared still more the scenes at the lodgings, Audiberte’s fearful frowns, and so he returned despairingly. The *concierge* at last had pity on him, advised him, if he wanted to see the minister, to wait for him at the Saint-Lazare Station, when the train left for Versailles.

He went there, entered the big, lively room on the first floor, at the time of the Parliamentary train. After five minutes he saw Numa Roumestan arrive, leaning on the arm of a secretary carrying his portfolio, his big coat open, his face beaming, even as it had appeared to him on the first day on the steps of the amphitheatre, and, from a distance, he recognized his voice, his good-natured words, his protests of friendship: “Rely on it—trust to me. It is as if you’d got it.”

The minister was then in the honeymoon of power. Apart from political enmities, often less violent in Parliament than might be imagined,

the rivalry of fine speakers, quarrels of barristers defending opposite causes, he knew of no enemies, not having had the time, during the three weeks since his taking office, of wearying out the askers of favours. He was still given credit. Scarcely two or three began to grow impatient, to watch for him as he passed. To them he shouted a loud "Good morning, friend," whilst hastening his steps, a phrase which anticipated reproaches and refuted them at the same time, kept requests familiarly at a distance, left the petitioners deceived and flattered. A windfall was that "Good morning, friend," and of a quite instructive duplicity.

At the sight of the musician coming towards him, showing his white teeth in a smile, Numa had a great desire to launch forth this "Good morning"; but how could he treat as a friend this rustic in a small otter-skin cap, in a grey jacket, whence his hands showed forth brown as on village photographs? He preferred to assume his "ministerial air" and to pass stiffly on, leaving the poor devil stupefied, dumb-founded, hustled about by the crowd pressing behind the great man. However, Valmajour appeared next day and the following days, but without venturing to approach, sitting on the edge of a seat, one of those resigned, sad silhouettes, such as one sees them at railway stations, among soldiers and emigrants, ready for all the hazards of an evil destiny. Roumestan could not avoid that dumb apparition which was ever in his path. It was all very well for him to feign to ignore him, to turn his eyes away, to talk louder whilst passing; his victim's smile was

there and remained till the train went off. Assuredly, he would have preferred some brutal shouting scene, in which the police would have intervened and he would have been freed. It occurred to him, the minister, to change his station, to go sometimes by the left bank in order to get rid of this living remorse.

The other was not discouraged.

"He's ill," he said to himself, on those days; and he returned obstinately to his post. At the lodgings his sister was awaiting him feverishly, watching for his return.

"*Eh! bé*, you saw him, the minister? He signed it, the paper?"

And what exasperated her more than the everlasting: "No—not yet," was her brother's phlegm, as he dropped in a corner the box that left its mark on his shoulder, a phlegm of indolence and carelessness as frequent among Southern natures as their liveliness. Whereupon the strange little creature flew into her furies. What had he got in his veins? Was there never to be an end of it? "Take care, if I suddenly put my finger in the business!" He very coolly drew from their case the flute, the ivory-tipped stick, rubbed them with a piece of wool, for fear of the damp, and promised to manage better next day, to try again at the ministry, and if Roumestan was not there, to ask to see his lady.

"Ah! *vai*, his lady. You know well she doesn't like your music. If it was the young lady—she, yes, truly!"

And she nodded her head.

"The lady or the young lady, they are both scoffing at you," said old Valmajour, ensconced before a fire which his daughter economically covered with cinders, and which was an eternal subject of quarrel between them.

In point of fact, owing to trade jealousy, the old man was not sorry at his son's failure. At first he was delighted at the journey, at the idea of seeing Paris, "the Paradise of women and the hell of hosses," as the waggoners say in those parts, with fancies about houris in light veils, and horses mutilated, writhing in the midst of flames. On arrival he had found cold, privations, rain. Out of fear of Audiberte, out of respect for the minister, he had been contented with grumbling, shivering in his corner, slipping in his word, winking with his eyes; but Roumestan's desertion, his daughter's fits of anger opened for him also the way to recriminations. He revenged himself for all the wounds to his self-love inflicted by the young man's success during ten years, shrugged his shoulders when listening to the flute.

"Music—music's all very well. It won't do you much good."

And he asked out loud if it was not pitiful that a man of his age should have carried him so far from home, to that Siberia, for him to die of cold and want; he invoked the memory of his poor holy wife, whom he had by the way killed with grief, "made her like a rabbit," to use Audiberte's expression, remained for hours groaning by the fire, till his daughter, tired of his laments, got rid of him with two or three sous to drink at

the wine-shop. There his despair soon calmed down. It was comfortable, the stove roared. He amused the gallery with his gasconnades, bragged of his son's tabour, which cost them all kinds of annoyances at their lodgings; for Valmajour, in expectation of his *début*, practised till midnight, and his neighbours complained.

"Never mind, go on," said Audiberte to her brother; and the landlord gave notice.

The evening before leaving, Audiberte, after the tambourinist's daily and fruitless quest was over, gave the men a hasty dinner, without speaking, but her eyes shining, her air determined with a resolve taken. When the meal was over, she left to them the task of cleaning the table, threw her long cloak on her shoulders

"Two months, two months soon we'll have been in Paris!" she cried with clenched teeth. "That's enough. I'm going to speak to him myself to that minister!"

"A pity the window doesn't give on to the street," she observed, taking off her cloak, which was quite dry. "You would have seen below what a fine carriage I came in."

"A carriage! you're joking?"

"And lackeys, and liveries. It's made quite a sensation here."

Then, amid their admiring silence, she related her expedition, in mimicry. Firstly, instead of asking for the minister, who would never have received her, she got the address—if you speak politely, you can get anything—the address of the sister, the tall young lady who came with him to Valmajour. She did not live at the ministry, but with her parents, in a quarter of small, badly-paved streets, with odours of druggeries, recalling to Audiberte her province. And it was far, and she had to walk. At last she found the house, in a square where there were arches, like around the Placette at Aps. Ah! the fine young lady! how well she had received her, without haughtiness, although everything looked very rich in her house, the room full of splendid gilding and silk curtains hanging up on every side—

"Eh! good-day. So you're in Paris? Since when?"

Then when she learnt how Numa made them come, she at once rang for her housekeeper—a lady also with a hat—and they all three went off to the ministry. You should have seen the eager courtesy and humble respect of all the old beadles who ran before them to open the doors.

"So you saw him, the minister?" inquired

Valmajour timidly, whilst he recovered his breath.

"If I saw him! And polite, I warrant you! Ah! poor fool, when I told you to see to the young lady in your job! It was she who quickly managed the business, and without discussion. In a week there will be a grand musical fête at the ministry to introduce you to the various directors. And immediately afterwards, *cra-cra*, the document and the signature."

The best of it was, the young lady had just accompanied her back there, in the minister's carriage.

"And how she wanted to come up here," added the Provençale, winking her eye at her father and twisting her pretty face with a meaning grimace. The old man's whole face, his cracked, dried-fig skin, contracted as if to say: "Understood!" He no longer laughed at the tabour. Valmajour himself, very cool, did not grasp his sister's perfidious allusion. He only thought of his coming *début*, and taking down the instrument began playing all his tunes over again, so as to send an adieu in trills from one end to the other of the Passage du Saumon.

CHAPTER VIII

A RENEWAL OF YOUTH

THE minister and his wife were finishing lunch in their first-floor dining-room which was ostentatious and too vast, and this could not be concealed by the thickness of the hangings, the heating-apparatus all over the *hôtel*, nor the steam of a copious repast. That morning they happened to be alone. On the tablecloth, among the dessert, which was always very abundant at the Southerner's table, there was his cigar-box, the cup of vervain which is the tea of the Provençal, and big boxes with many-coloured labels in which were inscribed the senators, deputies, rectors, professors, Academicians, society people, the ordinary and extraordinary *clientèle* of the ministerial *soirées*—some cards higher than others, for the privileged guests, necessary to the first series of "little concerts." Mme. Roumestan was turning them over, stopping at certain names observed furtively by Numa, who, whilst choosing his after-dinner cigar, was watching for a sign of disapproval on that calm physiognomy, a check

to the rather hazardous manner in which these first invitations had been made.

But Rosalie made no inquiry. All these preparations were indifferent to her. Since their establishment at the ministry, she felt herself yet further from her husband, separated by incessant obligations, a too numerous *personnel*, a breadth of life that destroyed intimacy. To that was added the ever-harrowing regret at having no children, at not hearing around her those tireless little steps, those hearty, ringing laughs which would have relieved their dining-room of the icy look of an inn room, where they seemed only to be sitting as passengers, together with the impersonality of the linen, furniture, plate, the whole luxurious apparatus of public position.

In the embarrassed silence ensuing at the end of the meal were heard stifled sounds, outbursts of harmony broken into by hammer-blows, the tapestry, the stand which was being nailed together downstairs for the concert, whilst the musicians rehearsed their pieces. The door opened. The chief of the cabinet entered, with papers in his hand—

“Some more requests!”

Roumestan was furious. No, by Jove! Were it the Pope himself, there was no more room. Méjean coolly laid before him a bundle of letters, cards, perfumed letters—

“It’s very hard to refuse—you promised.”

“I? Why, I never spoke to any one.”

“See here: ‘My dear Minister, I beg to remind you of your kindly word’; and this: ‘The general

told me you had been so kind as to offer him' and again: 'Remind the Minister of his promise.'

"Well, then, I'm a sleep-walker, *allons!*" cried Roumestan, amazed.

The truth is that hardly had the fête been decided on when he had told people he met in the chamber, in the Senate: "You know, I rely on you for the tenth," and as he added: "Quite an intimate affair," they would not have taken care to forget the flattering invitation.

Amazed at being caught red-handed before his wife, he attacked her as always in such cases—

"It's your sister, busy with her tambourinist. I didn't think of beginning the concert so early. But that girl was so impatient: 'No, no—at once.' And you were as urgent as she. The deuce take it if that tabour has not turned your head!"

"Oh! no, not mine," said Rosalie merrily. "And I'm even afraid such exotic music won't be understood by Parisians. It should be accompanied by the horizon of Provence, the costumes, the farandoles—but above all"—her voice grew serious—"it was only a question of keeping a promise."

"A promise—a promise," repeated Numa. "Soon I'll not be able to say a word."

And turning to his secretary, who was smiling—

"*Pardi!* my dear sir, all Southerners are not like you, cold and deliberate, greedy of their words. You're a sham Southerner, you are, a renegade, a *Franciot*, as the saying is with us. A Southerner! pooh! A man who has never lied and

doesn't like vervain!" he added with comic wrath,

"Not so *Franciot* as I seem, M. le Ministre," replied Méjean, very calmly. "On my arrival at Paris twenty years ago, I smelt terribly like my country. I had cheek, an accent, gesticulated—chattered and invented like——"

"Like Bompard," suggested Roumestan, who did not like other persons to laugh at his intimate, but did not mind doing so himself.

"Yes, faith, almost as much as Bompard—an instinct urged me never to speak the truth. One morning I felt ashamed, I laboured to correct myself. The exterior exaggeration one can readily get the better of by lowering one's voice, for instance. But the inward, that is what boils up, what wants to come out. So I took a heroic resolution. Whenever I surprised myself at a lie, my condemnation was not to speak for the rest of the day—that's how I was able to reform my nature. Nevertheless the instinct is there, at the bottom of my coldness. Sometimes I stop right in the middle of a phrase. It's not the word that's missing; on the contrary, I hold myself in, because I feel I'm about to lie."

"Terrible South! there's no means of escaping it," observed easy-going Numa, despatching the smoke of his cigar to the ceiling in philosophic resignation. "In my case it holds me particularly by the mania of promising, the itch I have to throw myself at people's heads, to wish them happiness despite themselves."

The usher on duty interrupted him by observing

significantly and confidentially from the threshold :

" M. Béchut has come."

The Minister had an impulse of ill-humour.

" I'm lunching. I want to be left quiet ! "

The usher excused himself. M. Béchut stated it was His Excellency—— Roumestan quieted down.

" Well, well, I'm going to him. Let people wait in my cabinet."

" Ah ! but no," said Méjean. " It is full. The Superior Council, you know. You fixed the time yourself."

" Then at M. de Lappara's."

" I put the Bishop of Tulle there," timidly declared the usher. " M. le Ministre had told me." Every room was full of people ; petitioners he had confidentially asked to come at that time so as to be sure not to miss him ; and for the most part people of mark.

" Take my little drawing-room. I'm going out," said Rosalie getting up.

And whilst the officer and the secretary went to look after these persons, the minister quickly gulped down his vervain, burnt himself as he repeated : " I'm overwhelmed with them—overwhelmed."

" What does that gloomy Béchut want now ? " asked Rosalie, instinctively lowering her voice. The house was so full that there was a stranger behind every door.

" What he wants ? His directorship, *té !* He is Dansaert's shark ! He waits for him to be thrown overboard for him to devour."

She went up to him quickly :

" M. Dansaert is leaving the Ministry ? "

" You know him ? "

" My father has often spoken of him to me. A compatriot, a friend from childhood. He considers him an honourable man of great intellect."

Roumestan stuttered a few reasons: " Bad tendencies—Voltairean. It interferes with a plan of reforms. And besides, he is old."

" And you are replacing him by Béchut ? "

" Oh ! I know the poor man has not the gift of pleasing ladies."

She smiled a fine, disdainful smile.

" I care as little for his impertinences as for his homage. What I don't pardon in him are his clerical grimaces, his display of orthodoxy. I respect all creeds. But if there's one thing ugly in the world, which one should hate, Numa, it's lying, it's hypocrisy."

In spite of herself, her voice rose, warm, eloquent, and her rather cold visage took on a glory of honourableness, of straightforwardness, a pink burst of generous indignation.

" Sh ! Sh ! " cried Roumestan, pointing to the door. Doubtless, he admitted, it was not very just. Old Dansaert rendered great services. But what should he do ? He had given his word.

" Take it back," said Rosalie : " come, Numa—for me—I beg you."

It was an affectionate command, supported by the pressure of a small hand on his shoulder. He felt moved. For a long while his wife seemed uninterested in his life, with a dumb forgiveness when

he confided to her his ever-changing schemes. The entreaty flattered him.

"Can one resist you, my dear?"

And the kiss he gave her on the tip of her fingers mounted quiveringly up to just beneath the tight lace sleeve. She had such lovely arms. He was pained nevertheless by being obliged to say something disagreeable to somebody, and rose with an effort.

"I shall follow you! I'll listen," she said, threatening him with a pretty gesture.

He went into the little drawing-room hard by, leaving the door half-open to give himself courage and that she might hear. Oh! the beginning was clear, energetic.

"I am in despair, my dear Béchut—what I wanted to do for you is impossible."

The savant made some replies, of which only the lachrymose tones could be heard. However, to Rosalie's great astonishment Roumestan did not yield, and went on defending Dansaert with surprising conviction for a man to whom the arguments had just been suggested. Certainly it cost him something to take back his word when given; but was it not better than to perpetrate an injustice? It was his wife's idea, modulated, set to music, with big, stirring gestures that made the wind disturb the tapestry.

"For the rest," he added, changing his tone suddenly, "I intend to recompense you for the little disappointment."

"Ah! *mon Dieu!*" murmured Rosalie. There was at once a hail of astounding promises, the

Cross of Commander for the 1st January next, the first seat vacant in the Superior Council, the—the— The other tried to protest, as a matter of form. But Numa:—

“Be quiet! be quiet! It’s an act of justice. Men like you are too rare.”

Intoxicated with this good feeling, stammering under his own affectionateness, if Béchut had not departed, the Minister would have positively offered him his portfolio. At the door, he called him back again—

“I count on you on Sunday, my dear sir. I’m starting a series of little concerts—among friends, you know.”

And turning back to Rosalie—

“Well! what d’you say? I don’t fancy I yielded at all to him.”

It was so funny that she greeted it with a loud burst of laughter. When he knew the reason and all the new promises he had just made, he seemed frightened.

“Well, well. They’re grateful all the same.”

She left him, smiling as she used to of old, quite light-hearted at her good deed, happy also perhaps to feel her heart stirred by something she believed had long died.

“Go, you angel!” exclaimed Roumestan, who looked at her as she went, stirred in heart, with tender eyes; and when Méjean returned to remind him of the Council—

“You see, my friend, when one has the happiness to possess such a woman—marriage is paradise on earth. Hasten and marry.”

Méjean shook his head, without answering.

"What! Isn't your affair going all right?"

"I fear not, indeed. Mme Roumestan had promised me to ask her sister, and as she does not talk to me any more about anything——"

"D'you want me to take charge of it? I'm on the wonderfully best of terms with my sister-in-law. I bet you I settle her."

There was a little more vervain in the tea-pot. Whilst pouring out a fresh cup, Roumestan flowered forth into protestation on behalf of his chief of the cabinet. Ah! his high position had not altered him. Méjean was ever his excellent, his best friend. Between Méjean and Rosalie, he felt himself more solid, more complete.

"Ah! my dear man, that woman, that woman! If you knew how kind, forgiving she has been. When I think I was actually capable"——

It positively cost him something to refrain from the confidence which was on his lips, with a deep sigh. "If I didn't love her, I should be exceedingly culpable ——"

The Baron de Lappara entered hastily, with a mysterious air——

"Mademoiselle Bachellery is here."

Numa's face went at once a deep red. The sparkle of his eyes concealed the affection revealed in them.

"Where is she? In your room?"

"I already had Monseigneur Lipmann," said Lappara, rather amused at the notion of a possible meeting. "I put her downstairs—in the big drawing-room. The rehearsal is over."

"Good. I'll go to her."

"Don't forget the Council," Méjean tried to say. But Roumestan without hearing dashed down the small staircase leading from the minister's private apartments to the ground-floor reception room.

Since the affair of Mme. d'Escarbés, he had always avoided serious *liaisons*, affairs of the heart or of vanity that might have ruined his home for ever. He was truly not a model husband ; but the contract was still valid. Rosalie, though awakened, was too straight, too honest, for jealous watchings, and though always uneasy never arrived at any proofs. Even at that hour, if he could have suspected the place this new caprice was about to take in his existence, he would have hurried to climb again up the stairs quicker than he had gone down ; but our destiny is always amusing itself by intriguing us, by coming to us wrapt up and masked, doubling the charm of first meeting by mystery. How could Numa have distrusted

"I'll bet she was going to you, that little rascal I met in the court this morning."

"Yes, M. le Ministre, she was; but she was coming for you."

And he named the little Bachellery.

"What! the *débutante* at the Bouffes—how old is she? Why, she's a child!"

The papers mentioned that winter a good deal about Alice Bachellery whom the caprice of a fashionable maestro had found in a small provincial theatre, and whom all Paris wanted to hear sing the song of the *Petit Mitron*, the refrain of which she gave with an irresistible vulgarity of fascination: "Chaud! Chaud! Les p'tits pains d'gru-au!" One of those divas the Boulevard swallows down half-a-dozen of each season, glorious on paper, swollen with gas and puffing, reminding one of the little pink balloons that have only one day of sun and dust in the public gardens. And do you know what she had come to ask the minister? The favour of figuring in the programme of the first concert. The little Bachellery at the Ministry of Public Instruction? It was so gay, so wildly mad, that Numa wanted to hear her ask it of him herself; and by ministerial letter smelling of the cuirassier's gloves let her know he would receive her next day. Next day Mlle. Bachellery did not come.

"She must have changed her mind," said Lappara. "She's so childlike!"

The Minister was piqued, did not speak of her for two days, and on the third sent for her.

Now she was waiting in the drawing-room of

the fêtes, red and gold, so imposing with its high windows on a level with the bare garden, its Gobelins tapestry and the great marble Molière sitting and dreaming at the furthest end. A Pleyel, some desks for the rehearsals, hardly took up a corner of the vast room, whose cold aspect, as of a deserted museum, would have impressed any but the little Bachellery; but she was so child-like! Tempted by the large floor glistening with wax, she amused herself with sliding from one end to the other, close-fitted by her furs, her arms in the cuffs which were too short, her nose in the air under the toque, with the manner of a coryphee dancing the "ballet on the ice" in the "Prophète."

Roumestan surprised her at this exercise.

"Ah! Monsieur le Ministre."

She was taken aback, her eyes opening and shutting, rather out of breath. He had come in, his head held high, walking gravely, to find out if there was anything abnormal in the interview, and to give a lesson to this ill-bred girl who bandied terms with Excellencies. But he was at once disarmed. How could it be otherwise? She explained her little affair so well, the ambitious desire she had suddenly felt to perform at that concert which was so much talked of, an opportunity for her to make herself heard otherwise than in operetta and comic songs. Then, thinking it over, the impulse had taken her.

"Oh! but it was one of those impulses. Wasn't it, mama?"

Roumestan then caught sight of a fat lady in a velvet mantle, with a plumed hat, who advanced

bowing in three time from the end of the room. Mme. Bachellery, an old star of the *cafés-concerts*, with a Bordeaux accent, with her daughter's small nose drowned in a broad monkey face, one of those awful mamas who appear beside their young ladies like the disastrous future of their beauty. But Numa was not in a studiously philosophic mood, was absorbed in the grace of capricious youth, in an adorably framed body, in the theatre argot mingled with an ingenuous laugh—the laugh of sixteen, said these ladies.

"Sixteen years! But at what age did she start on the boards?"

"She was born there, M. le Ministre. Her father, now retired, was director of the Folies-Bordelaises."

"A child of the ball, eh?" said Alice chaffingly, displaying thirty-two glistening teeth ranged close in a straight line, as if on parade.

"Alice! Alice! You're not respectful to His Excellency."

"Never mind. She's a child."

He made her sit near him on the sofa, with a good-natured, almost fatherly gesture, complimented her on her ambition, her tastes for high art, her desire to escape the facile and fatal successes of operetta, only she must work, work hard, study seriously.

"Oh! as for that," said the young girl flourishing a roll of music. "Every day two hours with La Vauters!"

"La Vauters? Perfect. Excellent method." He opened the roll like a connoisseur.

"And what shall we sing? Ah! ah! the valse in 'Mireille,' the song of Magali. Why, that comes from my part of the country."

He began to hum, with his head on one side, his eyes in front of him—

O Magali, ma bien-aimée,
Fuyons tous deux sous la ramée,
Au fond du bois silencieux—

She went on—

La nuit sur nous étend ses voiles
Et tes beaux yeux—

And Roumestan, at full pitch—

Vont faire pâlir les étoiles.

She broke in—

"Just wait—mama will accompany us."

And the desks being upset, the piano opened, she forcibly installed her mother. Ah! a determined little person!—The minister wavered a second, his finger on the page of the duet. If any one heard them!—Bah! they had been rehearsing every day for three mornings in the grand saloon. They began.

The two standing up followed on the same page of the music which Mme. Bachellery accompanied by heart. Their foreheads approaching nearly touched, their breaths mingled with the caresses of the rhythm. And Numa grew excited, gave expression, extended his arms, at the high notes. For some years, since his big political rôle, he had more often spoke than sung; his voice had become

heavy like his person, but he still took much pleasure in singing, especially with this child.

Actually, he had quite forgotten the Bishop of Tulle, and the Superior Council assembled round the big green table. Once or twice the usher's palace face had appeared with the clicking of his silver chain, to retire at once, frightened at having seen the Minister of Public Instruction and Worship singing a duet with an actress of the minor theatres. Numa was no longer minister, but Vincent pursuing Magali in her coquettish transformation. And how well she ran, how she escaped with her child-like mischievousness, the pearly brilliancy of her sharp-toothed laughter, till the moment when, vanquished, she abandoned herself, her wild little head bewildered by the running, on her friend's shoulder !

It was mama Bachellery, who broke the charm by turning round, as soon as the piece was ended—

"What a voice, M. le Ministre, what a voice !"

"Yes—I sang in my youth"—he said with a certain fatuousness.

"But you still sing magnificently.—*Hein, Bébé !* what a contrast with M. de Lappara !"

Bébé, who was rolling up her piece, slightly shrugged her shoulders as if so indisputable a truth deserved no other answer. Roumestan asked a little uneasily —

"Ah ! M. de Lappara—— ?"

"Yes, he comes sometimes to eat *bouillabaisse* with us ; then, after dinner, Bébé and he sing their duet."

At that moment the usher, hearing no more

music, resolved to go in, with the precautions of a trainer entering a wild-beast's cage.

"I'm coming—I'm coming," said Roumestan, and addressing the girl, in his most ministerial tone, in order to let her feel the hierarchical distance separating him from his attaché—

"I compliment you, mademoiselle. You have much talent, much, and if you like to sing here on Sunday, I gladly grant you the favour."

She exclaimed like a child—"Really?—oh! how nice you are!" and at once flung her arms round his neck.

"Alice!—Alice!—good gracious!"

She was however already far away, running through the *salons*, where she seemed so little in the high rooms, a child—quite a child.

He was stirred by the caress, waited a minute before going up again. Before him, in the withered garden, a sunbeam was traversing the lawn, warming and quickening the winter. He felt himself penetrated to the heart by a similar sweetness, as if that body, so full of life, so supple, as it touched him, had communicated to him a little of its spring warmth. "Ah! it's beautiful, is youth." He looked at himself in a glass, mechanically; an anxiety came to him which he had not had for years.—What changes, *boun Diou!* Very stout owing to his sedentary life, the carriages he abused, the muddy complexion of sleepless nights, the temples already thinned and grey, he was further frightened at the breadth of his cheeks, of the flat distance between his nose and ear. "If I let my beard grow to hide it"—Yes, but it would

grow white. And he was not forty-five. Ah! politics ages.

He then knew for a moment a woman's dreadful sadness, who sees herself ended, incapable of inspiring love, though she can still feel it. His reddened pupils dilated; and, in this palace of power, such deeply human bitterness, in which ambition was as nothing, held something more cutting still. But, with his fickleness of impression, he soon comforted himself, by thinking of glory, of his talent, his high position. Was not that equal to beauty, youth, in making oneself loved?

"Allons donc!"

He thought himself very silly, banished his grief by a shrug of the shoulder, and went up to dismiss the Council, because he had no time left to preside over it.

"What's the matter with you to-day, my dear Minister?—You seem quite rejuvenated."

More than ten times during the day, he was addressed with this compliment on his very marked good-humour in the corridors of the Chamber, where he surprised himself humming: "O Magali, ma bien-aimée." Seated on the ministerial bench he listened with an attentiveness very flattering to the orator to an endless discourse on the customs tariff—smiled happily, with his eyes bent down. And the Left, who were terrified by his reputation for astuteness, whispered trembling: "Let's look out—Roumestan is up to some game." It was simply the silhouette of little Bachellery, which his

fancy was amused to evoke in the vacuum of the buzzing speech, to make appear before the ministerial bench, with all her attractions in detail, her hair dividing her forehead with blond tresses, her tint of pink hawthorn, her alluring manner as of a girl already a woman.

Yet, towards night, he had another fit of gloom on returning from Versailles with some of his colleagues of the cabinet. Amid the stuffiness of a carriage full of smokers, they were chatting, in the tone of gay familiarity which Roumestan carried with him everywhere, about a certain velvet hat framing a creole pallor in the diplomatic tribune where it had caused a happy diversion from customs tariffs and set all the hon. members agog, as in a school-class when a butterfly flutters lost during a Greek lesson. Who was it? No one knew.

"You must ask the general," said Numa gaily, turning towards the Marquis d'Espaillon d'Aubord, War Minister, an old worn-out scamp where love was concerned—"Good—good—don't defend yourself ; she only had eyes for you."

The general made a grimace that carried his yellow old goat's beard up to his nose, as with a lever.

"It's ages since women don't look at me.—They've only eyes for those—there."

The man indicated in such easy-going terms, particularly dear to all aristocratic soldiers, was young De Lappara, sitting in a corner of the carriage, and preserving a respectful silence among the big-wigs. Roumestan felt himself hit without

precisely knowing how, and gave a lively retort. According to him there were many other things women preferred to youth in a man.

"They tell you so."

"I appeal to these gentlemen."

All bepaunched, with coats lumped over their stomachs, or withered and thin, bald or quite white, toothless, their mouths attacked by some disorder of health, these gentlemen, ministers, under-secretaries of State, were of Roumestan's opinion. The discussion grew lively amid the noise of the wheels, the loud creakings of the Parliamentary train.

"Our ministers are having a row," said the neighbouring compartments.

And the journalists tried to catch a few words through the walls.

"What they love," thundered Numa, "is the known man, the man in power. To tell themselves that he who is there before them, rolling his head on their knees, is famous, powerful, one of the levers of the world, that is what excites them!"

"*Hé!* quite so."

"Right—right——"

"I'm of your opinion, my dear colleague."

"*Eh bien!* I tell you, I, that when I was a simple little lieutenant, and when I used to go out on Sundays in full dress, with my twenty-five years, with new aiguillettes, I used to gather as I passed some of those women's looks that envelope you in a blow of the whip from nape to heel, some of those looks which they have not for a big epaulet of my age. So, now, when I want to feel the

warmth, the sincerity of one of those glances, a dumb declaration in the open street, d'you know what I do? I take one of my aides-de-camp, young, with good teeth, broad chest, and I pay myself for going out on his arm, s—n—d—D—!

Roumestan was silent till Paris. The melancholy of the morning seized him again, but with some anger added, an indignation against women's blind silliness, who can go mad about fools and handsome blockheads. After all, what rare quality had that Lappara? Without interrupting the discussion, he stroked his blond beard with a foppish air, his garments worn fastidiously, the neck part very open. And little Bachellery—his mistress, quite sure—the idea revolted him; but at the same time he wanted to know, to be convinced.

Hardly were they alone, whilst his *coupé* rolled towards the ministry, than he asked brutally, without looking at Lappara—

“Have you known those women long?”

“What women, M. le Ministre?”

“Why, those Bachellery ladies, of course!”

His brain was full of them. He thought every one thought about them like him. Lappara began laughing.

Oh! yes, it was a long time; they lived in the same country parts. The Bachellery family, the Folies-Bordelaises, all the jolly memories of eighteen years. His heart as a Lycée youth had beaten hard enough for the name to burst the buttons off his tunic.

“And to-day it beats for the daughter?” asked

Roumestan carelessly, wiping the glass with the tip of his glove to look at the wet dark street.

"Oh! the daughter, that's a different story altogether. In spite of her little flirty ways, she's a very cool, very earnest young lady. I don't know what she's trying for, but she's trying for something, which I suppose I am not in a position to give her."

Numa felt comforted:

"Ah! really? And yet you go again to them?"

"Why, yes—it's so amusing, the inner life of the Bachellerys. The father, the ex-director, composes comic couplets for the *café-concerts*. The mama sings and gesticulates them, whilst making *bouillabaisse* and fricassees. Shouts, disorder, scraps of music, the Folies-Bordelaises at home. Little Bachellery leads the uproar, whirls about, sups, plays the giddy, but doesn't lose her head an instant."

"Eh! You young rascal, you're reckoning on her losing it one day or another, and to your profit."

Becoming suddenly grave, the minister added: "A bad set for you, young man. You must be more serious than that, the devil! The Bordeaux madness can't last all your life."

He took his hand.

"You're not thinking of marrying, are you?"

"Faith, no, M. le Ministre—I'm very well as I am—unless an astounding windfall turns up."

"The windfall will be found for you. With your name, your relations——" And suddenly, impetuously: "What would you say to Mlle. Le Quesnoy?"

Lappara, despite his audacity, paled with rapture, with amazement.

"Oh! M. le Ministre, I'd never have dared——"

"Why not? Yes, yes—you know how I like you, my dear boy—I should be happy to see you in my family—I should feel myself more complete, more——"

He stopped right in the middle of his phrase, which he recognized having already remarked to Méjean in the morning.

"Ah! so much the worse! It's done."

He shrugged his shoulders and leant back in the carriage. "After all, Hortense is free, she will choose. In any case I shall have dragged this young fellow out of a bad set." In his own conscience, Roumestan was sure this sentiment alone had inspired his act.

CHAPTER IX

A SOIRÉE AT THE MINISTRY

THAT evening the Faubourg Saint-Germain had an unusual appearance. Small streets, usually quiet, that went to bed early, were awakened by the rumbling of omnibuses disturbed from their routes; other streets, on the other hand, suited to the ceaseless noise of the big Parisian arteries, showed like the bed of a river turned from its course, silent, empty, magnified, guarded at the entrances by the lofty silhouette of a Paris mounted guard or the gloomy shadow—across the asphalt—of a band of policemen signing to the carriages—"No thoroughfare."

At a distance the illumination of the ministry on its two façades, the fires lit on account of the cold in the middle of the road, the slowly filtering gleam of rows of lanterns concentrated on a single point, encircled the district with a fire-halo enlivened by the blue limpidness, the icy dryness of the air. But on approaching you were quickly reassured by the fine ordering of the fête, the even white sheet of light soaring to the top of the neighbouring houses, whose inscription in gold letters:

"Mairie du VII^e Arrondissement—Ministère des Postes et Télégraphes," could be read as in daylight, and melted away in Bengal fire, in fairy lighting of the scene in a few large, bare, motionless trees.

Among the passers-by who stopped despite the cold and formed an inquisitive hedge at the *hôtel* door, was a peasant woman wrapt in a long cloak who only let two sharp eyes be seen of her. She came and went, bent in two, her teeth chattering, but not feeling the frost, in an excitement of fever and intoxicating triumph.

Audiberte wanted to see for herself how it would all go off. With what pride she gazed at the crowd, the lights, the soldiers on foot and on horseback, the whole of a quarter of Paris turned upside down for Valmajour's tabour. For it was in his honour that the fête was being given, and she was *convinced that those fine gentlemen, those fine ladies* had only Valmajour's name on their lips. From the door in the Rue de Grenelle, she ran to the Rue Bellechasse, by which the carriages were leaving, went near a group of Paris guards, of coachmen in great-coats, round about a brazier flaming in the middle of the road, was astonished to hear them talk of the cold, very severe that winter, of potatoes freezing in the cellars, of matters quite unconnected with the fête and her brother. Especially was she irritated at the slowness of that endlessly defiling row of carriages; she would have liked to see the last of them go in, to say to herself: "It's all ready.—They're beginning.—This time it's once for all." But the night was

getting on, the cold becoming more piercing; her feet were freezing so as to make her cry with pain—it's rather too absurd to cry when you have so glad a heart! Finally she determined to go home, not without gathering together in a last look all those splendours, which were carried through deserted streets during that icy night in her poor wild head, when the fever of ambition was beating in her temples, congested with dreams, with hopes, her eyes for ever dazzled and blinded by that illumination to the glory of the Valmajours.

What would she have said, had she entered, had she seen those white and gold *salons* following one the other under their arched doors, magnified by mirrors in which was reflected the fire of the lustres, the glitter of the diamonds, the aiguillettes, the Orders of all kinds, in the shape of palms, of aigrettes, of brochettes, large as firework suns or small as brelogues, or hung round the neck by those broad red ribands that make one think of bloody beheadings.

There were there, pell-mell with the great names of the Faubourg, ministers, generals, ambassadors, members of the Institute and of the Superior Council of the University. Never in the arena at Aps, not even at the great meeting of tambourinists at Marseilles, had Valmajour had such an audience. His name, it is true, did not occupy much space in this fête whose occasion it was. The programme announced indeed: "Airs with variations on the tabour," with the name of Valmajour combined with that of several lyrical illustrations; but no one looked at the programme.

pany, to set a current of sympathy going amidst all this society solemnity, he introduced people to each other, threw them into each other's arms without warning: "What! You're not acquainted?—M. le Prince d'Anhalt—M. Bos, Senator," and did not notice that, hardly had *their names been uttered*, when the two men, after a sudden deep bow, "Monsieur, Monsieur," merely waited for him to go in order to turn their backs ferociously on each other.

"It's the devil to get the stiffness and dullness out of these *salons* of the Education Ministry. The shade of Fraysinous will certainly return to-night."

This reflection in a loud voice came from a group of young musicians crowding round Cadaillac, the director of the Opera, who was philosophically seated on a velvet stool, with his back to Molière's statue. Very corpulent, half deaf, with his moustache bristly and white, it was hard to distinguish the supple, light-hearted impresario of the Nabob's fêtes in that majestic idol with its swollen, impenetrable mask, whose eye alone betrayed the Parisian *blagueur*, his fierce science of life, his mind like a thorn-stick iron-shod, hardened in the fire of crawling. But, contented, fearing above all to be dislodged from his directorship, he drew in his claws, spoke little, especially here, was satisfied to underline his remarks about the official society comedy with Bas-de-Cuir's silent laugh.

"Boissaric, my lad," he asked in a whisper of an intriguing youth of Toulouse who had just had a ballet performed at the Opera after only ten years'

fighths, triumphs at the federal shooting meetings which lent all the faces around him the same look of amazement, annoyance and uneasiness. There was a certain amount of fun in it, but understood only by a few intimates, powerless to dispel the boredom that penetrated even to the concert hall, an immense room, very picturesque with its two floors of galleries, and its glass ceiling which seemed like the open sky.

A green decoration of palms, of bananas with long leaves motionless under the chandeliers, constituted a background of freshness to the dresses of the women lined and packed together on innumerable rows of chairs.

The discomfort on the faces here was complicated by the prospect of being two hours motionless before the concert platform. Oh! the tortures of the musical craze! They knew it all! It counted among the wearinesses of their winter and the cruel society burdens. Which is why, if you had sought throughout the immense hall, you would have found only a single contented, smiling countenance, that of Mme. Roumestan, and it was not the ballet-dancer smile of mistresses of households, so easily altered to an expression of hateful weariness when it feels itself no longer regarded, the face of a happy woman, a loved woman, about to begin life again. O inexhaustible affection of an honest heart that has only beat for one! There she was, beginning again to believe in her Numa, so kind, so gentle, for some time. It was like a return, the embracing of two hearts reunited after long absence. Without searching whence this

renewal of kindness could come, she saw him again, loving and youthful as he was one night before the hunting panel, and she was ever the desirable Diana, supple and neat in her dress of white brocart, her chestnut hair in bands over her pure forehead without an evil thought in it, when her thirty years seemed five-and-twenty.

Hortense was very pretty also, all in blue ; a blue tulle which engirt in a cloud her long figure slightly stooping, shaded her visage with a brown softness. But her musician's *début* pre-occupied her. She asked herself how that refined public would like the local music, whether, as Rosalie said, they ought not to have framed the tabour in a horizon grey with olive-trees and hills in lace ; and silently, agitatedly, she counted on the programme the items before Valmajour, amid a semi-rustle of fans, of whispered conversations, with which mingled the tuning of the various instruments.

A tapping of bows on desks, a rustling of paper on the platform where the choir has risen, parts in hand, a long gaze from the victims, like a desire to run away towards the high door obstructed by black suits ; and Glück's chorus sends its first notes towards the glass above, where the winter's night superimposes its blue sheets :

“ Ah ! dans ce bois funeste et sombre——”

It has begun.

Boredom !

That was indeed the prevailing note in that concert at the Ministry. Beneath the required admiration, the ecstatic physiognomies which are

part of the stock-in-trade of the sincerest women, it penetrated little by little, fixed the smile and the brightness of the eyes, spoilt their pretty poses as of birds perched on branches or sipping water drop by drop. One after the other, on the long rows of chairs, they struggled against it, with "Bravo!—Divine!—Delicious!"—in order to revive themselves, and succumbed to the invasive torpor which disengaged itself like a fog from that pool of sound.

Yet there were there the most famous, the most illustrious artists in Paris, interpreting classical music with all the science it needs, and which is only gained, alas! at the cost of years. For thirty years has La Vauters been singing that beautiful *romance* of Beethoven, "L'Apaisement," and never with more passion than to-night. Who other than Mayol, the handsome Mayol, has ever sighed the serenade in "Don Giovanni" with such airy delicacy! Unhappily they cannot hear his voice now; it is not good his rising on tiptoe, his neck outstretched, so as to eke out the worn voice with gesture; there is no result, none. Paris applauds in spite of it, grateful for past pleasures. But these used-up voices, these faded, too well-known faces, medals whose constant circulation has consumed the effigy, will not banish the fog hovering over the minister's fête, in spite of his efforts to revive it.

At one moment, Alice Bachellery's entry on the stage awakens and stirs up everybody. At the two doors of the hall there is a curious pushing forward to catch a glimpse of the little diva in her short skirts on the platform, with her mouth

half-open, her eyelids fluttering as with surprise to see so large a crowd. "Chaud! Chaud! les p'tits pains d'gruau!" hum the young clubmen. Old gentlemen of the University approach eagerly, stretching forth their heads on the side of their sound ears, so as not to lose a suggestion in the song of the hour. And it is a disappointment when with her shrill little voice she sings a great aria from "Alceste," prompted by La Vauters, who encourages her from the wings. Faces lengthen, black costumes desert, begin again to roam the room freely because the minister is not watching, as he has gone off to the other end of the last saloon on the arm of M. de Boë, quite dazed by such an honour.

Eternal childlikeness of Love! Pass twenty years in the Palais, fifteen in the tribune, be sufficiently master of yourself to preserve amid the most stormy meetings and savage interruptions the fixed idea and coolness of the penguin fishing in a howling tempest; and if passion has once anything to say to you, you will find yourself weak among the weak, trembling and cowardly to the pitch of desperately hanging on to an imbecile's arm rather than of hearing the least criticism of your idol.

"Pardon me, I must leave you—it's the entr'acte"—and the minister rushes away. People are pushing towards the buffet; and the comforted looks of all those unfortunate persons who have been restored to movement and speech, may give Numa the idea that his protégée has just had a very great success. They crowd about him, con-

gratulate, him—" Divine!—Delightful!" but nobody speaks positively of what interests him, and at last he gets hold of Cadaillac, who is passing near, walking on one side, thrusting off the human billow with his enormous shoulders like a lever.

" Well!—How did you like her?"

" Whom?"

" The girl," says Numa in a tone he tries to make indifferent. The other, sharp as a needle, understands, and without turning a hair:

" A revelation!"

The amorous man blushes as he did at twenty, at Malmus's.

" So then you believe that at the Opera—?"

" No doubt! But she needs a good showman," answered Cadaillac with his mute laughter; and whilst the minister runs and congratulates Mlle. Alice, the good showman goes on his way towards the buffet visibly framed by a large mirror at the end of a room decked out with brown and gold woodwork. Despite the austereness of the tapestry, the heavy aspect of the refreshment apparatus, ill-humour and boredom are here dissipated, in the presence of the huge bar laden with fine crystallised fruit, fresh fruit, sandwiches in pyramids, and give place—humanity resuming its rights—to greedy and voracious attitudes. People talk, they get animated, eyes flash, laughter rings out under the influence of the fine wines. A thousand things are said, words broken off, answers given to questions already forgotten. In one corner there are little indignant cries: " What a horror! —It's dreadful!" round about the *savant* Béchât,

the foe of women, who goes on with his invective against the weak sex. A quarrel among musicians.

"Ah, my dear chap, take care—you deny the augmented fifth."

"Is it true she's only sixteen?"

"Sixteen years since the vintage and a few years in bottle."

"Mayol!—*Allons donc*, Mayol!—ended, done for. Fancy the Opera giving two thousand francs every night for that!"

"Yes, but he takes one thousand francs in tickets for warming his room, and Cadaillac snaps up the rest at *écarté*."

"Bordeaux—chocolate—champagne."

"—to come to explain his conduct in the bosom of the Committee."

"—by remounting the *ruche* a little with loops of white satin."

Elsewhere, Mlle. Le Quesnoy, surrounded on all sides, recommends her tambourinist to a foreign correspondent, an impudent flathead, begs him not to go before the end, scolds Méjean for not backing her up, calls him a sham Southerner, *Franciot*, renegade. In the group at the side, a political discussion. An odious mouth projects itself, foaming at the teeth, chewing at words like balls, to poison them—

"All that the most subversive demagogy——"

"A Conservative Marat!" shouts a voice, but

the talk is lost in the confused sound of plates, glasses, conversations, which Roumestan's metallic tones suddenly dominate: "Quick! mesdames, mesdames.—You will miss the Sonata in *fa*!"

Deathlike silence. The long procession through the saloons begins again. Concertos, symphonies succeed one another. The handsome Mayol starts again trying to make sounds, La Vauters to touch the relaxed chords of her voice. Suddenly, a somersault of life, of curiosity, as just now on the entry of little Bachellery. It is Valmajour's tabour, the appearance of the splendid rustic, his soft otter's cap on his head, the red sash on his loins, his country cloak on his shoulder. An idea of Audiberte's, an instinct of her woman's taste, of dressing him thus to produce more effect among the black garments. Really, it is all new, improvised, that long tabour balanced on the musician's arm, the small flute on which his fingers run, and the pretty airs whose movement, lively and inspiring, awakens with a shiver the satin of beautiful shoulders. The *blasé* public is amused at the entirely fresh ballads, embalmed in rosemary, at the refrains of old France.

"Bravo!—Bravo!—Encore!"

And when he attacks the "*Marche de Turenne*" in a broad, victorious rhythm which the orchestra accompanies *en sourdine*, inflating, sustaining the rather weak notes of the instrument, there was a delirious outburst. He had to come back twice, ten times, summoned by Numa, whose zeal has been re-warmed by the success, and who now takes to his own account "the fancy of those ladies." He

relates how he discovered the genius, explains the wonder of the three-holed flute, gives details about the Valmajours' ancient castle.

"He's really called Valmajour?"

"Certainly—Princes des Baux—he's the last."

And the legend circulates, spreads, intensifies, a regular George Sand romance.

"I have the parchments at my house!" affirms Bompard in a tone admitting of no reply. But, amid the society enthusiasm, more or less factitious, a poor heart is excited, a young head is nearly intoxicated, takes seriously the bravos, the legends. Without saying a word, without even clapping, her eyes staring, abstracted, her long supple figure following in dream-rhythm the measures of the hero-march, Hortense finds herself again down therein Provence on the high platform commanding the sunburnt country, whilst her musician plays her the serenade as to a lady of the Courts of Love, and fits the pomegranate-flower to his tabour with a wild grace. The memory stirs her deliciously, and she whispers, leaning her head on her sister's shoulders: "Oh! how well I feel!" in a deep, heartfelt tone which Rosalie does not at once remark, but which will later become more defined, will haunt her like the murmured news of a misfortune.

"*Eh ! bô !* my brave Valmajour, when I told you—What a success!—*Hein ?*" cried Roumestan in the small saloon where a standing supper had been served to the artistes. The other stars of the concert thought the success a trifle overdone.

Little Bachellery however had no bitter feeling in the matter like Mayol and La Vauters. She played at children amid a group of young "mashers," laughing, fluttering about, biting with her white teeth. She tried Valmajour's flute.

"See here, M'sieu le Ministre !"

Then, noticing Cadaillac behind His Excellency, she gave him with a pirouette her childlike forehead to kiss.

"B'j'ou, m'n'oncle."—It was an imaginary relationship, a stage adoption.

"A sham giddy girl !" growled the good showman beneath his white moustache, but not too loud, because she was probably about to become an employee of his, and an influential.

Valmajour, with a foppish air, much run after by ladies, by journalists, stood before the fireplace. The foreign correspondent was putting to him brutal questions, not in the fawning tone he used towards ministers in private audiences ; but without troubling, the peasant answered by the story stereotyped on his lips : "It came to me one night, on hearing the nightingale sing——" He was interrupted by Mlle. Le Quesnoy, who handed him a glass and a plate filled as he had required.

"Good-day, monsieur.—And I too, I am bringing you the *grand-boire*." She had missed her effect. He answered with a slight nod, pointing to the chimney-piece : "Very good—very good—put it there," and went on with his story. "What the bird of the good God does with one hole——"

to the ball. It was now a ball that stirred in the rooms that were less full, but more lively; and the admirable orchestra revenged itself for three hours of classical music by suites of valse of the purest Viennese. Hortense, much sought after, as the minister's sister-in-law, the First President's daughter, beheld a flight of waistcoats hovering around her big dowry and her influence.

Lappara, greatly excited, declared to her whilst dancing that His Excellency had given permission for him——But the valse ended, she left him without waiting for the sequel, and went to Méjean who did not dance, and yet could not make up his mind to go.

"What a face you have, you grave man, you man of reason!"

He took her hand: "Sit down there, I have something to tell you. Authorised by my minister——" He smiled in great emotion, and Hortense, understanding by the trembling of his lips, quickly sprang up; "No, no—not to-night—I can't listen to anything, I'm dancing."

She escaped on Rochemaure's arm, who came for her for the cotillon. He also, extremely smitten, the worthy young man, always imitating Lappara, ventured to utter a phrase which made her go into a fit of merriment, that whirled with her all round the saloon; and, the figure ended, she went to her sister, whispered: "We're in for it—Numa has promised me to his three secretaries!"

"Which are you going to take?"

Her reply was cut short by the rolling of the tabour.

“The farandole!—The farandole!”

A surprise of the minister for his guests. The farandole to wind up the cotillon. And Hortense in the forefront, the farandole unrolls through the long enfilade of the drawing-rooms, followed by Valmajour playing with superb gravity, proud of his success and of the looks won for him by his masculine and sturdy figure in an original costume.

“How fine he is!” exclaimed Roumestan, “how fine!—A Greek shepherd!”

CHAPTER X

NORTH AND SOUTH

BETWEEN President Le Quesnoy and his son-in-law there never was any great sympathy. Time, frequent intercourse, the bonds of relationship had not diminished the apartness of their natures, so as to conquer the intimidating cold felt by the Southerner in the presence of the tall, silent man with the haughty, pale head, whose blue-grey eyes, the eyes of Rosalie, minus their affection and indulgence, lit upon his vivacious energy and froze it. Numa, fickle and mobile, ever at the mercy of his own speech, at once ardent and complex, revolted against his father-in-law's logic, straightforwardness, rigidity; and whilst envying his qualities, set them to the account of the coldness of the man of the North, of the extreme North, whom the President represented in his eyes.

"Further on, there's the white bear.—Then nothing more, the Pole and death."

Still, he flattered him, tried to fascinate him with adroit felinities, his snares to capture the Gaul; but the Gaul, subtler than he, did not let himself be enveloped. And when they talked politics on

Sundays in the dining-room in the Place Royale ; when Numa, cheered by the good fare, tried to persuade old Le Quesnoy that in truth they were very near an understanding, as they both wished the same thing—freedom ; you should have seen the repellent head-shake with which the President shook off all his arguments.

“ Ah ! but no, not the same ! ”

In four precise, hard-headed reasonings, he re-established the distances, unmasked the words, proved he was not letting himself be caught by such humbug. The barrister retreated jocularly, at heart much vexed, especially because of his wife, who, without ever interfering in politics, listened and looked. Accordingly, when returning at night in their carriage he tried to show her that her father had no common-sense. Ah ! if it had not been for her, he would have had a nasty retort. Rosalie, not to irritate him, avoided taking sides :—

“ Yes, it’s unlucky—you don’t understand each other,” but in her heart of hearts she held the President to be in the right.

With the entry of Roumestan into the ministry, the coldness between the two men had been accentuated. M. Le Quesnoy refused to show himself at the receptions in the Rue de Grenelle, and explained himself very clearly to his daughter :—

“ Tell your husband—to continue coming to my house and as often as possible, I shall be very glad ; but I’ll never be seen at the ministry. I know what those people are up to ; I don’t want to seem to be an accomplice.”

For the rest, the situation was saved in the eyes

of society by the profound mourning that kept the Le Quesnoys within their own four walls so long a time. The Minister of Public Instruction would probably have been very much embarrassed to know that his *salons* were frequented by that vigorous contradictor in whose presence he remained a little boy ; however, he affected to seem wounded by his decision, made an attitude of it, a thing always most precious to a comedian, and a pretext for only coming very unpunctually to the Sunday dinners, excusing himself with committees, reunions, obligatory banquets, which give husbands in politics such vast liberty.

Rosalie on the other hand did not miss one Sunday, arrived early in the afternoon, happy to recover in her parents' home the taste of family life which official existence scarce left her leisure to satisfy. With Mme. Le Quesnoy still at vespers, Hortense at church with her mother, or taken by friends to some musical *matinée*, Rosalie was sure to find her father in his library, a long room tapestried with books from top to bottom, shut in with those dumb friends, those intellectual confidants, the only ones at which his sorrow had never taken umbrage. The President did not sit down to read, he used to inspect the shelves, would stop at a beautiful binding, and standing up, without suspecting it, would read for an hour, not noticing either time or fatigue. He smiled palely when he saw his eldest daughter come in. After a few words exchanged, for neither of them was talkative, she also passed her beloved authors in review, selected, dipped into them beside him,

under the rather darkened light of a large court of the *Marais*, where fell in heavy notes, amid the Sunday quiet in the commercial quarters, the sounds of vesper bells. At times he would give her a half-open book—

"Read that!" underlining with his nail; and when she had read:—

"It's beautiful, isn't it?"

There was no greater pleasure for this young wife, to whom life offered such brilliance and luxury, than this hour with her old sad father.

She owed him her rectitude of thought, her feeling of justice which made her so valiant, also her artistic taste, the love of painting and the fine arts. Her mother Rosalie loved, worshipped, not without some revolt against a nature, which was too simple, too soft, annihilated in her own house, whom grief, which uplifts certain souls, had bent to earth to the most vulgar feminine pre-occupations, practical piety, the small household details.

In the middle of their quiet chatting, the noise of a door was heard, the *frou-frou* of silk. Hortense had returned.

"Ah! I knew I'd find you there."

She did not care for reading. Even novels bored her; they were never romantic enough for her imagination. After going up and down for five minutes, keeping her hat on—

"It smells musty here, with all these papers—don't you think so, Rosalie?—Come along with me a little—father has had enough of you. Now it's my turn."

And she would drag her off into her room, their room, for Rosalie had also lived in it till she was twenty.

There she saw, during a charming hour of chat, all the objects that had formed part of herself, her bed with cretonne curtains, her desk, the library where a little of her childhood remained in the titles of the volumes, in the puerility of a thousand nothings preserved with love. She found again all her thoughts in all the corners of the room, more coquettish and ornate than in her time, a carpet on the floor, small frail tables for sewing, for writing. More elegance and less order, two or three pieces of work begun, on the backs of chairs, the desk open with a quantity of writing material. When they entered there was always a brief minute of scurry.

"It's the wind," Hortense would say, bursting with laughter; "it knows I adore it, so it came to see if I was there."

"The window must have been left open," calmly replied Rosalie. "How can you live in there?—I am unable to think, myself, when nothing is in its place."

She got up to put straight a frame nailed to the wall, which worried her eye.

"Well, with me it's quite the opposite, it excites me—I fancy I am on a journey."

This difference of nature recurred in the countenances of the sisters. Rosalie, regular of feature, with a great purity of lines, calm eyes and colour changing like running water whose spring is deep; the other, with irregular traits, a clever look, on a

pale creole complexion. The North and South of father and mother, two temperaments of great diversity which had joined without fusion, each perpetuating its race. And that in spite of the life in common, the similar education in a big boarding-school where Hortense, under the same masters, a few years later, took up again the school tradition which had made of her sister a serious, careful woman, absorbed in her every act, and turned out Hortense a warped, chimerical creature, of restless mind, always agog about something. Sometimes, seeing her so excited, Rosalie would cry:—

"I am myself very happy—I have no imagination."

"I have nothing else!" Hortense would say; and she reminded her that in M. Baudoy's course of lectures—he had to teach them style and the development of thought, what he pompously called his "imagination class"—Rosalie had no success, as she expressed everything in a few terse words, whilst she herself would scribble volumes if she had as many ideas.

"That's the only prize I ever got, the prize of imagination."

They were however united in tender affection, one of those affections of a big for a little sister, into which there enters something of the filial and of the motherly. Rosalie took her everywhere with her, to balls, to her friends, to her rounds of shopping which refine the tastes of Parisian ladies. Even after their leaving school, she remained her little mother. And now she was busied about

marrying her, of finding the calm, level-headed companion who was indispensable to that madcap, the firm arm with which her impetuosity must be kept in balance. Méjean was obviously indicated ; but Hortense, who at first had not said no, suddenly displayed an evident antipathy. They had an explanation the day after the ministerial soirée, when Rosalie had surprised her sister's emotion, agitation.

" Oh ! he is kind, I like him well enough," said Hortense. " He is a loyal friend, such as one would wish to have near all one's life.—But he is not the husband I want."

" Why ? "

" You will laugh.—He does not speak enough to my imagination, there you are !—Marriage with him gives me the impression of a middle-class, rectangular house at the end of an avenue straight as a poker. And you know I prefer other things, the unforeseen, surprises."

" Who, then ? M. de Lappara ? "

" Thanks ! for him to prefer his tailor to me."

" M. de Rochemaure ? "

" The model paper-cutter—I who have a horror of paper."

And when the disquiet of Rosalie pressed her hard, wanting to know, questioning her intimately : " What I would like," said the girl, whilst a slight flame, like a straw fire, rose into the pallor of her complexion, " what I would like——," then in an altered voice, with a comic look—

" I'd like to marry Bompard ; yes, Bompard,

that's the husband of my dreams. At least he has imagination, resources against monotony."

She got up, paced the room, with her rather bent posture, which made her seem even taller than she was. People really did not know Bompard. What pride, what dignity in his life, and logic in his madness! "Numa wanted to give him a berth near him; he didn't want it. He has preferred to live his chimera. And the South is accused of being practical, industrious. There's one who belies the legend. Why at this very moment—he was telling me at the ball the other night—he is hatching ostrich eggs—an artificial hatcher; He is sure to get millions. He is far happier than if he had them.—But a man like that is a perpetual fairy-tale! Bompard for me! I want Bompard only."

"Well, I shan't get to the bottom to-day," thought the elder sister, who guessed there was something lurking beneath this badinage.

One Sunday Rosalie on arriving found Mme. Le Quesnoy, who was waiting for her in the anteroom and said mysteriously :—

"There's somebody in the drawing-room—a lady from the South."

"Aunt Portal?"

"You will see."

It was not Mme. Portal, but a lovely Provençale, whose rustic bow ended in a burst of laughter.

"Hortense!"

With her skirt reaching down to her flat boots, the corsage widened by folds of tulle, her features framed by falling waves of hair kept in its place

by the small headdress adorned with velvet chiselled, embroidered by jet butterflies, Hortense looked much like the "chato's" to be seen on Sunday flirting on the Lice at Arles, or walking two and two, with lowered eyelids, between the colonnettes of the cloister of Saint Trophyme.

"Would you believe she's so pretty!" cried the mother, enraptured at the living personification of the country of her youth. Rosalie on the contrary grieved with an unconscious sorrow as if that costume were carrying her sister far away, very far.

"There's a fancy dress!—It suits you, but I prefer you as a Parisian. And who has dressed you so well?"

"Audiberte Valmajour. She has just gone from here."

"As she comes often," said Rosalie, going into their room to take off her hat, "what a friendship—I shall be jealous!"

Hortense defended herself, somewhat put out. The Southern coil gave the mother pleasure.

"Isn't it fine, mother?" she exclaimed from one room to the other. Besides, the poor girl was so disorientalised in Paris, and so interesting with her blind devotion to her brother's genius.

"Oh! genius!" said the elder sister, shaking her head.

"*Dame!* You saw the other night at our house what effect—it's everywhere the same."

And when Rosalie replied that one must estimate at their true value such society successes, which were composed of complaisance, of *chic*, of the caprice of a soirée, Hortense burst out:—

"Well, then, he's at the Opéra."

Moreover, the Valmajours were not ordinary peasants, but the last representatives of a decayed family!

Rosalie, standing before a pier-glass, turned round laughing.

"What! you believe that legend?"

"Why of course! They descend directly from the Princes des Baux—the parchments are there like the coat of arms on their rustic door. The day they wished——"

Rosalie shivered. Behind the peasant flute-player was the prince. With a prize for imagination, that might become dangerous.

"There's nothing fine in all that"—and she no longer laughed this time—"there are round about Aps ten families of the so-called princely name. Those who have told you otherwise have lied out of vanity, out of——"

"But it's Numa, it's your husband—the other night at the ministry he gave all sorts of details."

"Oh! with him you know—you must make allowances, as he says."

Hortense was no more listening. She had returned to the drawing-room, and sitting at the piano she began singing in a loud voice—

| Mount 'as passa la matinado
Mourbieu, Marioun.

It was an ancient popular song of Provence set to an air as serious as plain-song, which Numa had taught his sister-in-law, and which he amused himself by listening to her singing, with her Pari-

sian accent, which reminded one of Italian pronounced by an Englishwoman.

Hortense went on singing, but presently broke off to rap out with the gesture and intonation of Numa when he was getting excited: "That, you see, my children. It's good as Shakespeare!"

"Yes, a picture of morals," observed Rosalie approaching. "The husband gross, brutal, the wife feline and a liar—a regular Southern household."

"Oh! my daughter," said Mme. Le Quesnoy in a tone of gentle reproach, the tone of old quarrels that have passed into a habit. The piano-stool turned briskly on its pivot and confronted Rosalie with the cap of the wrathful Provençale.

"It's too bad. What has the South done to you? As for me, I adore it. I did not know it, but my last journey with you has revealed to me my real country. It's all very fine that I was baptized at Saint-Paul; I belong myself to the other part. A child of the Placette! You know, mama, one of these days, we shall leave these cold Northerners and go and live, we two, in our beautiful South, where people sing, where they dance, the South of the wind, the sun, the mirage, of all that poeticises and broadens life. 'C'est là que je voudrais vi-i-vre.'" Her agile hands fell again on the piano, scattering the end of her dream in a confusion of resounding notes.

"And not a word about the tabour," thought Rosalie, "that's serious!"

Still more serious than she fancied.

From the day Audiberte had seen the young

lady tie a flower to her brother's tabour, at that very minute there had risen in her ambitious mind a splendid vision of the future, which had not been foreign to their transplantment. Hortense's welcome when she came to her to complain, her eagerness to rush off to Numa, strengthened her in her still vague hope. And since then, slowly, without opening her thoughts to her men-folk otherwise than by hints, with the duplicity of an almost Italian peasant girl, she made ready their paths by gliding, by creeping. From the kitchen in the Place Royale, where she began by waiting timidly in a corner on the edge of a chair, she struggled through to the drawing-room, established herself, always neat and well-coifed, in a poor relation's position. Hortense was wild about her, showed her to her friends like a pretty trinket brought from that Provence of which she spoke with passion. And the other, making herself out simpler than nature, exaggerated her barbaric bewilderments, her clenched fits of anger against the muddy sky of Paris, cried 'Boudiou!' very nicely and watched its effect like any theatre ingénue. The President himself smiled at it, at the 'Boudiou.' And to make the President smile!

But it was with the young lady, when alone with her, that she put all her caressing artifices in motion. She would suddenly fall down on her knees, take her hands, go into ecstasies over the least graces of her toilette, her way of tying a ribbon, of dressing her hair, emitting those leaden compliments to a person's face which give pleasure despite everything, so simple and spontaneous

they appear. Oh! when the young lady had got out of the carriage at the farm, she believed she saw the queen of the angels in person, so that she could not speak for stupefaction. And her brother, *pecairé!* When he heard the carriage in which the Parisian was returning creaking on the stone of the down-path, he said it was as if the stones were falling one by one on his heart. She made play with the brother, and of his pride, of his uneasiness. Uneasiness, why? I just ask you a moment. Since the minister's *soirée* they were talking of him in all the papers, his portrait appeared everywhere. And so many invitations in the Faubourg Saint-Germain that he could not manage them all. Duchesses, countesses wrote him perfumed notes, coronetted just like the carriages they sent to fetch him. *Eh! bien*, he was not contented, the poor fellow!

All this whispered to Hortense impressed on her some of the peasant woman's feverishness and magnetic will. Then, without looking, she asked if Valmajour had not perhaps down there in the country a bride waiting for him.

"He, a bride! *Avai*, you don't know him. He thinks too much of himself to want a peasant girl. The wealthiest of them have run after him, that girl of the Colombettes, and another one, and fine girls, you know! He didn't even look at them! Who knows what he's got in his head? Oh! those artists!"

And the word, which was new to her, assumed on her ignorant lips an indefinable expression, like the Latin of the Mass or some cabalistic formula

culled from Albertus Magnus. The heritage of Cousin Puyfourcat also very often recurred in her cunning chatter. She believed in the legacy and mentioned it to the girl, less in order to dazzle her than to decrease the social distance separating them. On the death of Puyfourcat, her brother would buy back Valmajour, would have the castle rebuilt and his titles of nobility confirmed, since they all said the documents were in existence.

At the end of these talks, prolonged sometimes till twilight, Hortense would remain silent a long time, her forehead touching the window-pane, seeing the lofty towers of the rebuilt castle rising in a rosy winter's setting sun, the platform streaming with lights and serenades in honour of the châtelaine.

"*Boudiou*, how late it is!" the peasant would cry, perceiving she had reached the desired mood. "And my men's dinner not ready! I'm off!"

Often Valmajour came and waited for her downstairs; but she never let him come up. She knew him to be so awkward and so vulgar, besides being indifferent to any notions of trying to fascinate. She had not need of him.

A person who also bothered her much, but difficult to avoid, was Rosalie, with whom her felinities, her sham simplicities did not take. In her presence Audiberte, with her terrible black eyebrows knitted at the forehead, said not a word; and in her dumbness there arose, together with a race-hatred, the sullen and vindictive anger of the weaker against the most serious obstacle to her plans. Her real grievance was that; but she avowed to

the younger sister there were others. Rosalie did not like the tabour ; then " she did not keep up her religion. And a woman who does not do so, you see—" Audiberte herself kept it up, and furiously ; she never missed a service and communicated on the appointed days. Which did not check her in anything, liar, hypocrite, violent even to crime as she was, seeking nothing in scriptural texts but precepts of revenge and hate. Only she remained honest, in the feminine sense of the word. With her twenty-eight years, her pretty face she preserved in the low environments in which they now lived the severe chastity of her thick peasant's *fichu*, pressed against a heart that had never beaten but with ambition for her brother.

" Hortense disquiets me ! Look at her."

Rosalie, to whom her mother uttered this confidence in a corner of the *salon* at the ministry, thought Mme. Le Quesnoy shared her mistrust. The mother's remark, however, applied to Hortense's condition, who had not succeeded in getting rid of a very bad cold. Rosalie looked at her sister. She had still her dazzling complexion, her vivacity, her cheerfulness. She coughed a bit, but, well ! like all Parisian ladies after the dancing season. The fine weather would very soon set her right.

" Have you spoken about it to Jarras ? "

Jarras was a friend of Roumestan's, one of the old ones of the Café Malmus. He gave assurance it was nothing, advised the waters of Arvillard.

" *Eh bien !* She must go there," said Rosalie

swiftly, enchanted at the pretext for sending Hortense away.

"Yes, but your father will be alone."

"I'll visit him every day."

Whereupon the poor mother confessed, sobbing, the fear caused her by this voyage with her daughter. For a whole year she had had thus to go the round of the watering-places with the son they had lost. Was she about to start on the same pilgrimage, with the same fearful end in prospect? In his case also, he was seized in the fulness of health, in the fulness of strength.

"Oh! mama, mama—please be silent."

And Rosalie scolded her gently. Hortense was not ill, you see; the doctor said so. The journey would be a simple distraction. Arvillard, in the Dauphinese Alps, a wonderful country. She would have liked to accompany Hortense in her place. Unluckily, she could not. Serious reasons.

"Yes, I understand. Your husband, the ministry."

"Oh! no, it isn't that."

And in her mother's arms, in the heart-intimacy they rarely enjoyed together: "Listen, but keep it to yourself alone, for nobody knows it, not even Numa," she confessed to the still very frail expectation of a great happiness of which she had despaired, which made her mad with joy and fear, the new hope of a child who was perhaps about to come.

CHAPTER XI

WHAT HAPPENED AT ARVILLARD

ARVILLARD-LES-BAINS, *August 2, 1876.*

“WELL, it's very queer, the place from which I am writing to you. Imagine a square hall, very high, flagged, stuccoed, echoing, where the light from two large windows is veiled by blue curtains even to the last panes, further darkened by a kind of floating steam, tasting like sulphur, which sticks to the dresses, tarnishes gold ornaments; within, people sitting against walls on benches, chairs, stools, round small tables, people that look at their watches every minute, get up, go out to give place to others, revealing each time through the half-open door the crowd of visitors, walking about in the bright vestibule, and the white fluttering apron of hurrying servants. No noise, despite all this movement, a constant murmur of whispered conversations, of newspapers being unfolded, of bad rusty pens scratching on the paper, a church-like meditative-ness, bathed, refreshed by the great jet of mineral water installed in the centre of the hall and whose spring is broken against a metallic dish, scatters itself in sprays, pulverizes itself over broad streaming basins. That is the inhalation room.

I may tell you, my darling, that every one does not inhale in the same way. Thus the old gentleman now opposite me follows literally the doctor's orders: I know them all. Feet on a stool, chest out, keep the elbows in, and the mouth always open to facilitate breathing. Poor dear man! How he inhales, with what trust, what small, devout, and credulous eyes, that seem to say to the spring—

“O spring of Arvillard, cure me properly, see how I inhale, what trust I put in you.”

Then we have the sceptic who inhales without inhaling, his back turned, shrugging his shoulders and gazing at the ceiling. Then the disheartened ones, the real sick who feel the uselessness and nullity of it all; a poor lady, my neighbour, whom I see, after each cough, quickly put her finger to her mouth, look whether the glove is not stained at the tip with a red point. And yet the people find the means of being merry.

Some ladies of the same hotel bring their chairs together, group themselves, embroider, whisper, comment on the *Visitors' Journal* and the list of foreigners. The young persons read English novels with red covers, some priests read their breviary; as for me, you know novels are not in my line, especially novels of to-day, where everything happens as in life. Besides, I correspond with two or three victims, Marie Tournier, Aurélie Dansaert, and you, my big sister, whom I adore. Look out for regular diaries. Just think! two hours' inhalation four times every day! No one here inhales as much I do; that is, I am a real

phenomenon. I am much looked at on that account and I am rather proud of it.

Apart from this, no other treatment, except the glass of mineral water I go and drink at the spring morning and evening, and which is bound to conquer the obstinate hoarseness that bothersome cold has left in my voice. It's the speciality of the waters of Arvillard; so the singers have a rendezvous here. The handsome Mayol has just left us with quite new vocal chords. Mlle Bachelery, you know, the little diva of your fête, is so well under the treatment that after finishing the three regular weeks, she is beginning three more, for which the *Visitors' Journal* praises her highly. We have the honour of living in the same hotel as this young and illustrious person, attended by an affectionate mother from Bordeaux who at *table d'hôte* makes a request for "appetites" in the salad and speaks of the 140 franc hat worn by her young lady at the last Longchamps. A delightful couple and extremely admired among us. People swoon away at Bébé's pretty ways, so her mother says, at her laugh, at her liftings of a brief skirt. They crowd before the sanded court of the hotel to see her play croquet with the little boys and girls—she only plays with quite little ones—run, jump, throw a ball like a regular street urchin.

Every one says: "She's so childlike!" For me, I believe her sham childlikeness is part of a rôle, like her skirts with broad knots. Then she has such an extraordinary way of kissing that fat Bordeaux woman, hanging round her neck,

making her rock her, before everybody! You know how caressing I am, well! true, it embarrasses me to kiss mama.

A very curious, but less cheerful, family also is Prince and Princess d'Anhalt, their daughter, governess, servants and suite, who occupy the whole first floor of the hotel of which they are the personages. I often meet the princess on the staircase, climbing step by step on her husband's arm, a fine-looking fellow, dazzling in health. She only goes to the establishment carried in a chair; and it's heart-rending that hollowed, pale head behind the small window-pane, the father and child who walk beside it, the girl looking very poorly, with all her mother's features and also perhaps her illness. She is bored, this little one of eight years, who is forbidden to play with the other children and looks sorrowfully from the balcony at the games of croquet and the hotel riding-parties. They think her blood too blue for such common amusements, they prefer to keep her in the mournful atmosphere of a dying mother, with a father who promenades his sick wife haughtily about, or to leave her to the servants.

The other night there were a lot of us in the big drawing-room on the ground floor where we meet to play games, sing, even dance sometimes. Mama Bachellery had just accompanied Bébé in a cavatina from an opera—we want to enter the Opéra, we've even come to Arvillard to "recuperate the voice for that," according to the mother's elegant phrase. Suddenly the door opens and the princess appears, with her grand air, dying,

elegant, wrapt in a lace shawl that conceals the fearful and significant emaciation of the shoulders. The child and husband followed.

"Go on, please," coughs the poor woman.

And lo and behold ! that beast of a little singer goes and chooses out of all her repertory the most heart-rending, the most sentimental romance, "Vorrei morir," something like our "Dead leaves" in Italian, a sick woman who fixes the date of her death in autumn, in order to give herself the illusion that all nature will die with her, covered by the first fog as by a shroud.

"Vorrei morir nella stagion dell 'anno."

The tune is graceful, of a sadness that prolongs the caress of the Italian words ; and in the big drawing-room, into which, through the open windows, penetrated the perfumes, the light flittings of birds, the refreshingness of a lovely summer night, that longing to live still to autumn, that truce, that surcease demanded from evil took on something poignant. Without saying a word, the princess rose, went out suddenly. In the black of the garden I heard a sob, a long sob, then a man's voice which scolded, and those wailings wept by a child who sees sorrow for her mother.

To Arvillard they only send convalescents like me, or desperate cases in which nothing does any good. Luckily we only have at our hotel, the *Alpes Dauphinoises*, three patients of the latter kind, the princess and two young Lyonnese, brother and sister, orphans, very rich, they say, who seem to be at the worst ; the sister especially, who has

the white-pale hue of Lyonnese women, wrapt up in peignoirs and knitted shawls, without a jewel, a ribbon, any care for coquetry. She smells of poverty, this rich girl. She is done for, knows it, despairs and gives up. There is on the contrary in the young man's hollowed figure, closely fitted by a jacket in the fashion, a terrible will to live, an incredible resistance to evil.

"My sister has no spring. I have!" he said the other day at the *table d'hôte*, in a hoarse voice which can no more be heard than La Vauters' "ut" when she sings. And the fact is he has a tremendous amount of go. He is the heart and soul of the hotel, the organizer of the games, parties, excursions: he rides on horseback, in sledges, a kind of small sledges laden with branches, on which the mountaineers of these parts shoot you down the steepest inclines, he vales, fences, shaken by dreadful attacks of coughing, which do not stop him one moment. We have further a medical celebrity, Dr. Bouchereau. you remember, the doctor whom mama had gone to consult about our poor André. I don't know if he recognized us, but he never salutes. An old wolf.

We have a very simple establishment, very convenient, two rooms on the second floor, the whole valley in front of us, a circle of mountains black with firs at the foot, and which are shaded off, lightened up as they climb with masses of eternal snow.

In the evening there is the drawing-room; in the day-time we roam in the park for the treatment which, connected with this existence at once so

busy and so empty, takes hold of you and absorbs you. The amusing hour is after lunch, when we group ourselves at little tables for coffee, under the big limes, at the entrance of the garden. It is the hour of arrivals and departures.

All this stir amuses me, but our dear mama remains very sad, much absorbed, in spite of the smile she essays when I look at her. I divine that every detail of our life brings her a heart-rending recollection, an evocation of lugubrious images. She has seen so much of those caravan-serais of sick persons, during the year when she followed her dying one from watering-place to watering-place, in the plain or on the mountain, under the pines at the edge of the sea, with a hope always deceived and the eternal resignation she was obliged to show in her martyrdom.

Really, Jarras might well have prevented this renewal of her sorrows; because I am not ill, I hardly cough at all any more, and, apart from my nuisance of a cold which gives me a voice like a hawker's, I have never felt so well. An appetite like Hades, fancy! one of those awful appetites that can't wait. Yesterday after a lunch of thirty courses, with a menu more complicated than the Chinese alphabet, I see a woman picking strawberries before her door. All of a sudden a longing seizes me. Two bowls, my dear, two bowls of those big strawberries, so fresh, "the fruit of the country," as our waiter at table says. And that's my stomach!

All the same, my darling, how lucky it is neither you nor I have taken the illness of that poor

brother I hardly knew, and whose haggard features, disheartened expression (such as he has it in his portrait in our parents' room), I find here on other countenances! And what an original is that doctor who once tended him, the renowned Bouchereau! The other day mama wished to introduce me to him, and in order to get a consultation we prowled in the park around the tall old man with his brutal and harsh physiognomy; but he was entirely surrounded by the doctors of Arvillard, listening to him with the humility of school-boys. So we waited for him at the exit of the inhalation. Time wasted. Our man began walking at a pace as if he wanted to run away from us. With mama, you know, one can hardly walk quickly, and we missed him again. Finally, yesterday morning Fanny went to ask his housekeeper, on our behalf, if he could receive us. He sent reply that he was here to look after himself and not to give consultations. There's a churl for you! It's true I have never seen such a pallor, wax-like. Father is a high-coloured gentleman compared with him. He lives only on milk, never comes down to the dining-room, much less to the *salon*. Our fussy little doctor, he whom I call Monsieur "That's All Right," declares he has a very dangerous heart disease, and that it is the waters of Arvillard that have enabled him to endure for the last three years.

"That's all right! That's all right!"

6th August.

So it's true, Numa is coming to see us. Oh, how glad I am, how glad I am! Your letter arrived

by the one o'clock courier, and the distribution takes place in the hotel bureau. A solemn moment, decisive for the hue of the day. The bureau full, people form in a semi-circle round fat Mme. Laugeron, very imposing in her blue flannel peignoir, whilst her authoritative voice, rather affected, as of a former lady companion, announces the many-coloured addresses of the budget. Each person goes forward as his name is called, and I must tell you there is a certain *amour-propre* involved in having a large batch. On what do we here not set some self-love in this perpetual friction of vanities and follies? When I think I have managed to get proud of my two hours' inhalation! "M. le Prince d'Anhalt—M. Vasseur—Mlle. Le Quesnoy." Disillusion. It's only my fashion paper. "Mlle. Le Quesnoy." I look to see if there is nothing else for me, and run off with your dear letter to the further end of the garden, to a bench shut in by great nut-trees.

That is my bench, the corner in which I isolate myself in order to dream, to weave my romances; for, an astonishing thing! in order to invent well, to develop according to M. Baudoy's rules, large horizons are not needful for me. When it is too big, I lose myself, I am scattered. The only annoyance about my bench is the neighbourhood of a swing, where that little Bachellery spends half her days in having herself launched into space by the young man with elasticity. I should rather think he must have a spring to push her like that for hours! And there are the cries of Bébé, the little screams: "Higher! still higher!" *Dieu!*

How that girl exasperates me. I wish the swing would despatch her into the clouds and that she would never come down again.

I feel so well, so far apart from the others, on my bench, when she is not there. I tasted your letter there, the postscript of which made me cry out with delight.

Oh! blessed be Chambéry and its new *lycée*, and that foundation stone to be laid, which brings in to our regions the Minister of Public Instruction. He will be very comfortable here for the preparation of his speech, either walking in the avenue or under my nut-trees when Mlle. Bachellery does not spoil them. My dear Numa! I understand him so well, he is so living, so cheerful. How we are going to talk together about our Rosalie and of the serious motive preventing her from travelling at the moment. Ah! *mon Dieu*, it's a secret. And mama made me swear so—she is also glad to welcome dear Numa. On a sudden she is losing all bashfulness, all modesty, and you should have seen her stateliness as she entered the hotel bureau to engage the rooms for her son-in-law the Minister. No! but the face of our hostess when she heard the news!

“What! mesdames, you are—you were?”

“We were—we are——”

Her broad face grew lilac, purple, an impressionist palette. And M. Laugeron and all the servants! Since our arrival, we have asked in vain for an extra candle; immediately there were five on the mantelpiece. Numa will be well served, I will answer for it, and put up. He will be given

the Prince d'Anhalt's first floor, which will be free in three days. It seems the waters of Arvillard are deadly to the princess ; and the little doctor himself is of opinion she should go as soon as possible. "That's all right," because if a misfortune happened, the *Alpes Dauphinoises* would not recover from it.

It is piteous the haste displayed in connection with the leaving of these unfortunates ; how they are urged, how they are pushed, with the help of the magnetic hostility exuding from places when one is inopportune. Poor Princess d'Anhalt, whose arrival was so fêted here ! For a trifle, she would be taken back to the borders of the Department between two gendarmes. The hospitality of watering-places !

Apropos, and Bompard ? You don't tell me if he will be one of the company. Dangerous Bompard ! if he comes, I am quite capable of eloping with him on some glacier. What developments we should discover for ourselves, towards the summits ! I laugh, I am happy. And I inhale and I inhale, rather put out by the neighbourhood of the dreadful Bouchereau, who has just come in and sat down two places away from me.

What a hard look he has, that man ! His hands on the handle of his stick, his chin leaning on it, he speaks out loud, looking straight ahead, without addressing any one. Ought I to take it to myself what he says about the imprudence of visitors, about their dresses of bright cambric, about the foolishness of going out after dinner in a country where the evenings are deadly cool ?

The malicious fellow ! One would fancy he knows I am going to beg to-night at the church of Arvillard for the work of the Propagation. Father Olivieri is to relate in the flesh his missions in Tibet, his captivity, his martyrdom, Mlle. Bachellery to sing Gounod's "Ave Maria." And I am making myself a fête of the return through all the small dark streets with lanterns, like a real torchlight procession.

If M. Bouchereau has given me a consultation in those words of his, it is too late : I don't want any. First of all, monsieur, I have *carte blanche* from my little doctor, who is far more obliging than you and has even allowed me a little valse in the drawing-room to wind up with. Oh ! only one, you know. Besides, when I dance a little too much, everybody is after me. They don't know how strong I am with my figure like a tall reed, and that a Parisian lady is never ill from over-dancing. "Take care. Don't tire yourself." The one brings my shawl ; another shuts the windows at my back, for fear I catch cold. But the most attentive of all is the young man with the spring, because he finds I have a deuced lot more of it than his sister. It's not difficult, poor girl. Between ourselves I believe the young gentleman, desperate at Alice Bachellery's coolness, has fallen back on me and is paying me his court. But, alas ! he is losing his pains, my heart is captured, Bompard has it all. *Eh, bien !* no, it is not Bompard, and you yourself suspect it is not Bompard. Who is the hero of my romance ? It is—it is—Ah ! So much the worse, my hour is gone by. I shall tell you another day, Mademoiselle "Chilly."

CHAPTER XII

TRAGEDY AND COMEDY

THE morning on which the *Visitors' Journal* announced that "Son Excellence M. le Ministre de l'Instruction publique," Bompard attaché, and their suite, had arrived at the *Alpes Dauphinoises*, the consternation in the neighbouring hotels was great.

La Laita had been actually keeping in reserve during the past two days a Catholic Bishop of Geneva in order to produce him at a favourable moment, as well as a Councillor-General of the Isère Department, a Lieutenant-Judge at Tahiti, an architect from Coston, a whole swarm in fact. *La Chevreite*, too, was expecting a "Deputy of the Rhône and family." But the Deputy, the Lieutenant-Judge, all vanished, carried away, swallowed up in the furrow of glorious flame that followed Numa Roumestan everywhere. He alone was talked about, busied about. Every pretext was good enough to introduce oneself into the *Alpes Dauphinoises*, to pass over the lawn before the little drawing-room on the ground floor, where the Minister was eating between too ladies

and his attaché, to see him play *boule*, dear to Southerners, with Father Olivieri of the Missions, a holy, dreadfully hairy man, who through living among savages had assumed some of their ways, uttered awe-inspiring cries and brandished the *boules* above his head like a tomahawk.

The minister's handsome face, the affability of his manners won him all hearts ; and particularly his sympathy for the humble. On the day after his arrival the two waiters who served the first floor declared at the office that the minister would take them with him to Paris for his personal service. As they were good servants, Mme. Laugeron made a grimace, but did not let His Excellency see any of it, whose stay was such an honour to her hotel. The prefect, the rector arrived from Grenoble in full dress, to present their homage to Roumestan. The Abbé of the Grande Chartreuse—he had pleaded for them against the Praemonstratensians and their elixir—sent him with great pomp a case of extra-fine liqueur. Finally the Prefect of Chambéry came for his orders for the ceremony of laying the foundation stone of the Lycée, an occasion for a declaratory speech and a revolution in the ways of the University. The minister, however, requested a little respite : the labours of the session had fatigued him, he wanted to get his second wind, to quiet down among his family, to get ready at leisure this Chambéry discourse, which was to be of such considerable import. And M. le Préfet perfectly understood that, asking only to be warned forty-eight hours beforehand, in order to lend the *brilliance necessary to the ceremony*. The stone

had waited two months, it could well wait further for the illustrious orator's good pleasure.

In reality, what kept Roumestan at Arvillard was neither the want of repose nor the leisure necessary to that marvellous improvisation, on which time and reflection had the effect of damp on phosphorus, but the presence of Alice Bachellery. After five months of a passionate flirtation Numa was no further advanced with his "little one" than the day of their first meeting. He frequented the house, tasted Mme. Bachellery's *bouillabaisse*, the *chansonnettes* of the ex-director of the Folies-Bor-delaises, recognized those trifling favours by a mass of presents, bouquets, despatches of ministerial boxes, tickets for the meetings of the Institute, of the Chamber, even the palms of officer of the Academy for the song-writer, all that without forwarding his projects. He was not, however, one of those novices who go fishing at all hours, without having first tried the water and baited it properly. Only he had to do with a most subtle carp, who amused herself at his precautions, nibbled at the bait, gave him at times the illusion of capture, and suddenly escaped, leaving his mouth dry with desire, his heart whipt by disturbances of his supple, undulating and enticing fish. Nothing more enervating than that game. It was in Numa's hands to stop it by giving the little one what she asked, her nomination as *première chanteuse* at the Opéra, an agreement for five years, a big salary, the whole drawn on perforated paper, and not by a simple handshake of Cadaillac's. She no more believed in that than in the "I answer for it—it's as if you

had it," by which Roumestan had been trying for five months to hook her.

The latter found himself on the horns of a dilemma. "Yes," said Cadaillac, "if you renew my lease." Now, Cadaillac was burnt out, done for; his presence at the head of the first theatre of music, a scandal, a blemish, a purulent inheritance from the Imperial administration. The Press would assuredly cry out against the gambler, thrice bankrupt, who could not wear his cross as an officer, and the cynical showman, shamelessly squandering the public money. Weary at last of being unable to let herself be caught, Alice broke the line and ran away, dragging the hook.

One day the minister arriving at the Bachellery, found the house empty and the father who, to comfort him, sang him his last refrain—

"Donne-moi d'quoi q't 'as, t'auras d'quoi qu'j'ai."

He forced himself to patience for a month, then returned to see the fertile song-writer who wanted to sing him his new one—

"Quand la saucisson va, tout va"—

and to inform him that the ladies, finding themselves admirably put up at the watering-place, had the intention of doubling their sojourn. It was then that Roumestan recalled that he was expected for that foundation stone of the Lycée at Chambéry, a promise "made in the air" and which would probably have remained there, if Chambéry had not been near Arvillard, where, by

a providential chance, Jarras, the minister's doctor and friend, had just sent Mlle. Le Quesnoy.

They met, on his arrival, in the hotel garden. She, very surprised to see him, as if that very morning she had not read the pompous note in the *Visitors' Journal*, as if for the last week the whole valley through the thousand voices of its forests, of its fountains, its innumerable echoes, had not announced His Excellency's coming—

"You, here?"

He, with his imposing ministerial air—

"I came to see my sister-in-law."

He was besides astonished to find Mlle. Bachellery still at Arvillard. He thought her gone a long time ago.

"*Dane!* I must take great care of myself, as Cadaillac pretends my voice is so unsound."

Thereupon a little Parisian salute from the end of her eyelids, and she went off, singing brightly, a pretty lark-trill, which you hear long after the bird is out of sight. Only, from that day, she changed her ways. She was no longer the precocious child, always romping about the hotel, sporting on the swing, playing innocent games, who was only amused with the little ones, disarmed the severest mamas, the most morose ecclesiastics by the frankness of her laugh and her punctuality at services. They saw now appear Alice Bachellery, the diva of the Bouffes, the pretty, free-and-easy young woman of the world, surrounding herself with young fops, improvising fêtes, parties, suppers, which her mother, always present, only half protected from evil interpretations.

Every morning there started from the perron a merry cavalcade of which she was the centre attraction, joined by all that was free, that was bachelor, at the *Alpes Dauphinoises* and the neighbouring hotels, the Lieutenant-Judge, the American architect, and especially the young man with the spring, whom the diva no longer seemed to drive to despair with her innocent infantilities. And the day was not complete except when the whole party had been drenched on their trip by one of those mountain storms, varied with lightning and hail, which frightened the horses, dramatized the landscape, prepared a sensational return, with the little Bachellery in a man's overcoat, her toque adorned with a woodcock's feather, holding the reins, whipping hard to warm herself, and when once on the ground relating the peril of the trip with the keen voice, the flashing eyes, the lively reaction of her youth against the chill shower and a slight shiver of fear.

If at least she had then felt the need of a good sleep, one of those sleeps of stone which are procured by excursions in the mountains! No, even till morning there was in those women's rooms a succession of laughs, songs, uncorked bottles, suppers which were taken up at such unheard-of hours, tables rolled along for baccarat, and over the head of the minister, whose apartment was just underneath.

He complained several times to Mme. Laugeron, who was much divided between her desire to be agreeable to His Excellency and the fear of discontenting clients of such connexions.

These sleepless nights, heavy July nights, which Roumestan passed in feverishly turning over and over in his bed certain importunate thoughts, whilst up above rang his neighbour's clear laugh, mingled with singing and scraps of tunes, he might have employed at his Chambéry speech ; but he was too excited, too furious, restraining himself from mounting to the floor above in order to kick out the young man with the spring, the American, and the infamous Lieutenant-Judge, a dishonour to the French magistracy in the Colonies, in order to seize by the neck that wicked little scamp, telling her once for all—

“ Will you soon have finished making me suffer like that ? ”

One afternoon, at the hour when the band played, the coquettish and talkative hour in the life of baths, whilst all the visitors, crowded in front of the establishment as on the deck of a ship, were coming and going, turning in a round or taking their places on the seats packed together in three rows, the minister, in order to avoid Mlle. Bachelery, whom he saw arriving in a dazzling blue and red costume, escorted by her staff, had retired to a lonely alley, and seated alone at the corner of a bench, penetrated in his preoccupations by the melancholy of the hour and of the distant music, was mechanically fending off with the end of his parasol the scintillations of fire with which the setting sun was flooding the alley, when a slow shadow passing over his sun caused him to raise his eyes. It was Bouchereau, the celebrated doctor, very pale, haggard, dragging his feet along.

They knew each other even as at a certain height of life all Parisians know one another. By accident, Bouchereau, who had not gone out for several days, felt in a sociable temper. He sat down, they talked.

"So you are ill, doctor?"

"Very ill," said the other in his wild-boar manner. "A hereditary evil—a hypertrophy of the heart. My mother died of it, my sister also—only I shall not last as long as they, because of my dreadful profession; I may last one year, two at the very utmost."

To that great scientist, to that infallible diagnoser speaking about his death with such tranquil assurance, there was no reply to be made but futile banalities. Roumestan understood it, and in silence he thought that there were sorrows in that case very differently serious from his own. Bouchereau went on without looking at him, with the vague eyes, the implacable sequence of ideas, which the habit of the professional chair and of lecturing gives to the professor—

"We doctors, because we have the appearance of it, people think we feel nothing, that we only pay heed to the sickness in the sick person, never the human and suffering being. Great mistake!—I have seen my master, Dupuytren, who yet passed for hard as iron, sobbing aloud before a poor little diphtheritic patient who said gently that it worried him to die. And those heart-rending appeals of motherly anguish, those passionate hands which clutch your arm: 'My child! Save my child!' And the fathers who stiffen

themselves in order to tell you in a very manly voice, with big tears running down their cheeks: 'You will get him out of that, won't you, doctor?' It is all very well to harden oneself, such despairs wound the heart; and that is all right, when the heart is always attacked! Forty years' practice, to become each day more vibrating, more sensitive. It is my patients who have killed me. I am dying of others' sufferings."

"But I thought you no longer gave consultations, doctor," observed the minister, who was moved.

"Oh! no, never again, not for anybody. Were I to see a man fall down there before me, I should not even bend down. You understand, it is revolting in the long run, that sickness I have fostered from all sicknesses. I want to live, I—there's nothing but life."

He grew animated in his pallor; and his nostril, marked with a morbid stigma, drank in the light air impregnated with warm aromas, vibrating fanfares, cries of birds. He resumed with a heart-broken sigh—

"I practise no more, but I always remain a doctor, I retain that fatal gift of diagnosis, that horrible second-sight of the latent symptom of the suffering about which one wishes to be silent, which, hardly regarded at all in the passer-by, in the being who walks, speaks, acts in full vigour, shows me the dying man of to-morrow, the dull corpse—and that as clearly as I see the syncope coming on to which I shall succumb, the last swoon from which nothing will bring me back."

"It's terrifying," murmured Numa, who felt himself paling, and, a coward in the presence of illness and death, like all Southerners, those maniacs in favour of life, turned away from the redoubtable savant, dared no longer to look him in the face, for fear of allowing him to read on his rubicund face the sign of an early end.

"Ah! that terrible diagnosis which they all envy me, how it saddens me, how it spoils for me the little of life that yet remains. Look here! I know here a poor woman whose son died ten, twelve years ago, of laryngeal phthisis. I had seen him twice, and I alone of all asserted the seriousness of the illness. To-day I find the mother again with her young daughter; and I can say that the presence of these unfortunates ruins my stay at the watering-place, causes me more harm than my treatment will do me good. They *pursue me, they wish to consult me, and I, I refuse to do so absolutely*. No need to auscultate the child to condemn her. It was enough for me to have seen her the other day throw herself voraciously on a bowl of strawberries, to have looked during the inhalation at her hand lying on her knees, a thin hand on which the nails are swollen up, are raised above the fingers as if ready to detach themselves. She has her brother's phthisis, she will die before a year is out—but let others tell it them. I have had enough of those stabs which recoiled on me. I don't want any more."

Roumestan had risen, greatly frightened.

"Do you know the ladies' names, doctor?"

"No. They sent me their card; I did not even

want to see it. I only know they are at our hotel."

And suddenly, gazing at the end of the alley—

"Ah! *mon Dieu*, there they are! I'm off."

At the end, when the band was playing its final accord, there was a movement of umbrellas, of gay dresses fluttering among the branches at the first sounds of the dinner-bells ringing round about. Out of an animated, gossiping group, the ladies Le Quesnoy detached themselves, Hortense tall and *svelte* in the light, a dress of mousseline and valenciennes, a hat garnished with roses, in her hand a bouquet of those same roses bought in the park.

"With whom were you talking, Numa? It looked like M. Bouchereau."

She was in front of him, dazzlingly bright, in so favourable an aspect of happy youth, that the mother herself began to lose her terrors, allowing some of that bewitching gaiety to be reflected on her old face.

"Yes, it was Bouchereau, who told me of his wretched life—he is very down in the mouth, poor man!"

And Numa, gazing at her, was reassured.

"The man is mad. It is not possible, it is his own death he takes with him and diagnoses everywhere."

At that moment Bompard appeared, walking very swiftly, flourishing a newspaper.

"What now?" inquired the minister.

"Great news! The tambourinist has made his début."

Hortense was heard murmuring: "At last!" and Numa, who was beaming, asked—

"Success, wasn't it?"

"You bet!—I haven't read the article, but three columns in the first position in the *Messenger*!"

"Yet another one I have invented," remarked the minister, who had sat down again, his hands in the armholes of his waistcoat, "Come, read it to us."

Mme. Le Quesnoy, observing that the dinner-bell had rung, Hortense answered quickly that it was only the first time; and with her cheek on her hand, in a pretty pose of careful attention, she listened.

"Is it to the Minister of Fine Arts, is it to the Director of the Opéra that the Parisian public owes the *grotesque mystification of which it was the victim last night*?"

They all started, except Bompard, who in his vivacity as a fine elocutionist, soothed by the *ron-ron* of his own phrasing, without understanding what he was reading, looked at them one after the other, much surprised at their astonishment.

"But go on," said Numa, "go on!"

"In any case, it is M. Roumestan whom we hold responsible. It is he who brought us from his province this bizarre and barbaric booby, this——"

"There are some very wicked people," broke in the girl, paling beneath her roses. The reader went on, his eyes rounded by the enormities he saw coming—

"—— to whom our Academy of Music owes it that for one night it resembled a return from the fair at Saint Cloud. And verily he had to be a famous booby, to believe that Paris——"

The minister tore the paper violently from him.

"You're not going to read us that tomfoolery right to the end, I suppose—it's quite enough to have brought it to us."

He ran through the article, with the quick glance of a publicist accustomed to Press invectives. "Provincial Minister—the Roumestan of Val-majour—hissed the ministry and burst his tabor." He had enough of it, hid the mischievous sheet at the bottom of his pockets, then got up, suppressing the rage which swelled his face, and taking Mme. Le Quesnoy's arm—

"Let's go and dine, mama. That will teach me not to interpose again for a lot of good-for-nothing people."

They were going all four in a line, Hortense with her eyes on the ground, in consternation.

"It concerns an artist of great talent," she said, trying to strengthen her rather muffled voice, "he must not be held responsible for the injustice of the public, for the irony of the newspapers."

Roumestan stopped.

"Some talent—some talent—*bé*, yes—I don't say otherwise—but too exotic."

And raising his sunshade—

"Let's beware of the South, little sister, let's beware of the South—don't let's overdo it—Paris would get tired."

He continued walking with deliberate steps, calm

and cold as an inhabitant of Copenhagen, and the silence was only disturbed by the crackling of the gravel under their steps, which in certain circumstances seems like the crushing, the annihilation of a fit of anger and of a dream. When they were in front of the hotel, whose immense hall sent forth by its ten windows the hungry noise of spoons at the bottom of the plates, Hortense stopped, and raising her head—

“So, this poor fellow—you’re going to desert him?”

“What am I to do? It’s no good struggling—since Paris won’t have him.”

She had a look of almost contemptuous indignation.

“Oh! it’s awful, what you say—*Eh bien*, I—I am prouder than you, and loyal to my enthusiasms.”

She crossed in two bounds the perron of the hotel.

“Hortense, the second bell has gone.”

“Yes, yes, I know—I shall come down.”

She went up into her room, shut herself in, with the key inside, so as not to be disturbed. Opening her desk, one of those coquettish *bibelots* by means of which the Parisian woman gives personality even to an inn room, she drew out of it one of the photographs she had had taken of herself with the ribbon and the fichu of Arles, wrote a line at the bottom and signed it. Whilst she was addressing it, the hour sounded at the clock tower of Arvillard in the violet sombreness of the valley, as if to solemnize what she was daring to do.

“Six o’clock.”

A mist was rising from the torrent, in wandering, fleecy patches of white. The amphitheatre of forests, of mountains, the silver aigrette of the glacier in the rose-hued evening, she noted the least details of that silent, quiet minute, as one notes in the calendar one date among all others, as one underlines in a book the passage that has stirred one most, and thinking out loud—

"It is my life, all my life that I bind at this moment."

She took to witness of it the solemnity of the evening, the majesty of nature, the grand peacefulness of everything around her.

Her whole life which she bound! Poor little woman, if she had known how small a thing it amounted to!

A few days later Mesdames Le Quesnoy left the hotel, Hortense's cure being finished. The mother, though reassured by her child's healthy appearance and by what the little doctor told her of the miracle worked by the nymph of the waters, was in a hurry to end that form of existence, the least details of which re-awakened her former martyrdom.

"And you, Numa?"

Oh! he, he reckoned to remain a week or two longer, to go on with a certain amount of the "cure," and to profit by the quiet in which their departure would leave him, in order to write the famous discourse. That was going to make a fine row, of which they would have news in Paris. *Dame!* Le Quesnoy would not be satisfied.

And suddenly Hortense, who was ready to go, though so happy to return home, to see again the dear absent ones whom the distance made still dearer to her, for she had imagination even in her heart, Hortense felt a sorrow at leaving the beautiful country, the hotel society of three weeks' friends to whom she did not know she was so attached. Ah ! loving natures, how you give yourselves, how everything lays hold of you, and what pain then to break the invisible and sensitive threads ! They had been so good to her, so obliging ; and at the last hour there crowded about the carriage so many extended hands, affectionate faces. Some girls kissed her.

" It won't be gay now without you."

They promised to correspond, they exchanged souvenirs, perfumed boxes, mother-of-pearl paper-cutters with the inscription, " Arvillard, 1876," in a blue reflection of the lakes. And whilst M. Laugeron slipped into her bag a phial of superfine chartreuse, she saw up above, behind the window-pane of her room, the mountaineer woman who served her, stanching her eyes with a big purple handkerchief, she heard a worn-out voice murmuring at her ear : " Elasticity, mademoiselle—always elasticity." Her friend, the consumptive, who was sending her a farewell look, his eyes hollow, haggard, feverish, but sparkling with energy, with will, and with some emotion too. Oh ! the kind people, the kind people.

Hortense did not speak for fear of crying.

" Good-bye, good-bye all ! "

The minister, who accompanied the ladies to

the distant station, took his place opposite them. The whip cracks, the bells ring out. Suddenly Hortense exclaims "My parasol!" She had it only a moment ago. Twenty persons dash for it. "The parasol—the parasol." In the room, no, in the *salon*. The doors open and shut, the hotel is rummaged from top to bottom.

"Don't look for it — I know where it is."

Always lively, the girl leaps out of the carriage and runs into the garden towards the cradle of nut-trees where that very morning she added a few chapters to the romance running through her ebullient little head. The parasol was there, thrown across a bench, something of herself left at her favourite spot and resembling her. What delightful hours spent in that nook of bright verdure, what confidences flown away with the bees and the butterflies! Doubtless she would never return there; and the thought panged her heart, kept her there. Even to the long creaking of the swing, which at that hour she thought charming!

"Zut! you're bothering me."

It was the voice of Mlle. Bachellery who, furious at seeing herself deserted for the departing visitors, and thinking herself alone with her mother, spoke to her in her usual language. Hortense thought of the filial caressings which had so often irritated her nerves, and laughed to herself as she returned to the carriage, when at the turning of an avenue she found herself face to face with Bouchereau. She was giving way, but he held her by the arm.

"So you're leaving us, my child?"

“ But yes, sir.”

She did not know exactly what to say, upset by the meeting and the fact that he was speaking to her for the first time. So he took her hands in his, kept her thus in front of him, with his arms apart, considered her deeply with his piercing eyes under their white, bristling eyebrows. Then his lips, his grasp, all trembled, a wave of blood empurpling his paleness—

“ Well, good-bye—a good journey ! ”

And without more words, he drew her to him, pressed her against his chest with a grandfather's tenderness, and went off, his hands pressed on his heart, which was bursting.

CHAPTER XIII

THE CHAMBLÉRY SPEECH

Non, non, je me fais hironde-c-elle
Et je m'envo-o-le à tire d'ai-ai-le.

WITH her tart voice, which had that morning been originally quite clear and good-humoured, the little Bachellery was singing before her mirror whilst she finished buttoning her gloves. Attired for the trip, her cheerful little person had a pleasant odour of fresh toilette and new costume, strictly trim, in contrast with the disorder of the hotel room, where the remains of a supper were visible on the table among odds and ends, cards, candles, close to the uncovered bed and a big basin full of that marvellous Arvillard essence which is unsurpassable for calming the visitors' nerves and making their skins like satin.

Below, the basket-carriage, shaking its bells, and a youthful escort prancing before the perron, were waiting for her.

As her toilette was about ready, there was a knock at the door.

"Come in!"

Roumestan entered, much excited, handed her a big envelope.

"Here it is, mademoiselle. Oh! read—read."

It was her engagement at the Opéra for five years, with the required salary, the right to have her name in capitals, everything. When she had deciphered it article by article, coldly, deliberately, even to Cadaillac's fat-fingered signature, then, but only then, she made a step towards the minister, and, lifting her veil, already put down against the dust of the excursion, raised up to him the rosy mouth—

"You are good—I love you——"

Nothing more was needed to make the publicist forget all the worries the appointment was bound to cause him. He restrained himself, however, remained upright, cold, supercilious as a roc.

"Now I've kept my word I retire—I don't want to derange your party."

"My party? Ah! yes, it's true—we're going to Château-Bayard."

And passing her arms round his neck, coaxingly—

"You'll come with us. Oh! yes—oh! yes——"

She touched his face with her big, pencilled eyelashes, and even nibbled at his statue-like chin, not very hard, with the tips of her child's teeth.

"With young people?—but it's impossible. You are not thinking of it?"

"Those young men?—I have a good joke with them—I'll get rid of them—mama will tell them. Oh! they're used to it—you understand, mama?"

"I'm going," said Mme. Bachellery, who could be observed in the side-room, her foot on a chair,

trying to get her merino boots, a size too small, over her red stockings. She gave the minister a most elaborate theatrical bow, and ran down to dismiss the gentlemen.

"Keep a horse for Bompard—he'll come with us," cried the little one; and Numa, touched by this attention, tasted the delicious joy of hearing, with this pretty girl in his arms, the impertinent youths whose caracolings had so often wounded his heart, departing slowly with ears lowered. A kiss long pressed on a smile that promised everything, then she drew away.

"Go quick and dress—I'm in a hurry to be off."

What a murmur of curiosity throughout the hotel, what an eager peeping through the blinds, when it became known that the minister was going on the trip to Château-Bayard, and he was seen to get into the carriage and sit opposite the singer, with his broad white waistcoat and his big Panama hat. After all, as Father Olivieri observed, who was much toned down by his voyages, what harm was there in that, did not the mother accompany them? Is not Château-Bayard a spot of historical interest, calculated to draw the attention of the Minister of Public Instruction? Do not therefore, let us be so intolerant, *mon Dieu*, especially in speaking about men who give their lives to the defence of the sound doctrines and our holy religion.

"Bompard is not coming, what is he doing?" murmured Roumestan, impatient at waiting there, with so many inquisitive eyes watching, for he could be seen from the windows, in spite of the

carriage-hood. At a first-floor window something extraordinary appeared, white, round, outlandish, which shouted in the tones of the former chief of the Circassians—

“Go in advance—I’ll catch you up.”

As if they had only been awaiting this signal, the two mules scampered away, shaking their bells, and had crossed the park in incredibly short time, and reached the bath establishment.

“Look out! Look out!”

The frightened bathers and the sedan-chairs had to get out of the way as well as they could, whilst the women with their big pockets full of money and coloured tickets appeared at the end of the gallery, and the shampooers, with no more clothing than Bedouins under their woollen shawls, appeared on the staircase leading to the heated room, the curtains of the air-baths were lifted, to see the minister and the singer pass. They were, however, already at a distance, galloping at full speed through the dark, narrow streets of Arvillard, over the sharp pebbles veined with sulphur, which emitted sparks as the carriage sped over them, shaking the ramshackle old houses where leprosy still lingers, and bringing the inmates to door and window, bowing and waving hats in the minister’s honour. The ladies sat proudly on their seats opposite him, enraptured to be with so great a man, did not put themselves at ease till they were in the country on the long Pontcharra road, when the mules had a rest at the foot of the Tower of Treuil, which Bompard had fixed as the rendezvous.

The minutes go by, no Bompard. They know he is a good horseman, he has so often bragged about it. They are amazed, they are irritated, Numa especially, who was impatient to be far away on that white, straight road, which seems endless, to go forward into that day which opens like a vein, full of hopes and adventures. At length, from a whirlwind of dust amid which pants a frightened voice, "Ho!—la—ho!—la," emerges Bompard's head, surmounted by one of those cork helmets covered with white cloth worn by the Anglo-Indian army, and which Bompard had assumed in order to aggrandize, to dramatize his voyage, making his hatter believe he was off to Bombay or Calcutta.

"Come on, dawdler."

Bompard nodded with a tragic air. Evidently many things had happened since his departure from the hotel, and the Circassian must have given the hotel people a poor idea of his equilibrium, for large patches of dust soiled his sleeves and his back.

"Bad horse," he said, greeting the ladies, "bad horse, but I made him step out."

So effectually had he done so that the strange beast would not now move an inch farther, pawing the ground and turning round like a sick cat despite his cavalier's efforts. The carriage was already far away.

"Are you coming, Bompard?"

"Go in advance—I'll catch you up," he cried again in his finest Marseilles accent; then he made a despairing gesture and he vanished in the direc-

tion of Arvillard in a cloud of flying hoofs. Every one thought: "He must have forgotten something," and did not trouble about him any more.

The road now wound about high ground, mountains rising up as far as could be seen on either side of the French high-road bordered with walnut-trees, while on the other side great chestnut and pine forests variegated the landscape. Deep down in the glen were smiling villages, encircled by vineyards, corn and maize-fields, mulberry and almond-trees, patches of golden broom whose pods, bursting open with the heat, made a constant crackling, as if the earth were on fire. Such might have been thought to be actually so, because of the excessive sultriness of the air, which appeared to proceed not so much from the sun, now almost invisible behind a veil of mist, as from the soil, so parched and dried up as nearly to be in a state of combustion, so that the view of the Glayzin and its summit coiled with snow, which, it seemed, one could almost touch with the end of a parasol, was deliciously refreshing.

Roumestan did not remember any landscape comparable to that, no, not even in his dear Provence; he could not imagine any happiness more complete than his. Neither care, nor remorse. His loyal and believing wife, the hope of a child, Bouchereau's prediction about Hortense, the disastrous effect that would be produced by the appearance of the Cadillac decree in the *Officiel*, nothing of the kind now existed for him. His whole fate hung on this beautiful girl, whose eyes were reflecting his eyes, her knees touching his, and

who beneath her azure veil, tinted pink by her blond skin, sang whilst pressing his hand—

Maintenant je me sens aimée.

Fuyons tous deux sous la ramée,

Whilst they were being carried along in the wind, the scenery on the road was rapidly enlarging, bringing to view an immense semi-circular plain, lakes, villages, then mountains, shaded according to distance, the beginning of Savoy.

"How beautiful it is! how great it is!" the singer was exclaiming; he was whispering, "How I love you!"

At the last halt, Bompard again joined them, on foot, very pitiable, leading his horse by the bridle. "The beast is astonishing," he said, without adding more, and the ladies asking if he had fallen: "No—it's my old wound re-opened." Wounded, where, when? He had never mentioned it, but, in the case of Bompard, one had to expect surprises. They made him get into the carriage, his very peaceful horse being docilely tied behind, and they set off for the Château-Bayard, whose crumbling towers, restored in Vaudal style, could be distinguished on a plateau.

A female servant came out to them, an astute mountaineer, at the orders of an old priest formerly officiating in the neighbouring parishes, who lives at Château-Bayard, on condition of allowing visitors to visit it freely. When they are seen approaching, he shuts himself in his own room, unless they happen to be eminent persons; but the minister

took care not to let it be known who he was, and the new-comers were, therefore, escorted by the attendant, who showed them over all that remains of the ancient manor of the brave knight without fear and without reproach, explaining the details of the ruin in phrases learnt by heart, in the singing tone usual with guides, while the coachman laid lunch beneath an arbour in the small garden.

"Here is the ancient chapel where the good knight morning and evening—I beg mesdames and messieurs to notice the thickness of the walls."

They noticed nothing. It was dark, they stumbled against heaps of rubbish only faintly lit up by the light from a loophole entering over a hay-loft made among the rafters. Numa, with the little one's arm under his, scoffed a bit at the Chevalier Bayard and "his respectable mother, the Dame Hélène of the Germans." The odour of old things bored them; and even one moment, in order to try the echo of the kitchen vaults, Mme. Bachellery having begun her husband's last song, there on the spot, quite freely, "*J'tiens ça d'papa—j'tiens ça d'maman*," no one was scandalized; on the contrary.

But outside, the lunch having been served on a massive stone table, and when the first hunger was appeased, the calm splendour of the horizon about them, the valley of the Graisivardan, the Bauges, the severe outlines of the Grande-Chartreuse, and the contrast, in this scenery on large lines, of the little terraced orchard where this old recluse lived, absorbed entirely in God, in his tulip-trees, in his bees, penetrated them gradually with something

grave, sweet, which resembled religious reverence. At dessert, the minister, opening the guide-book to refresh his memory, spoke of Bayard, "of his poor lady mother who tenderly wept," the day when the child, going off to Chambéry as page to the Duke of Savoy, made his small roan horse prance before the northern gate on the very spot where the shadow of the great tower was lengthening, majestic and frail, like the phantom of the old vanished castle.

And Numa, warming to his subject, read to them Madame Hélène's splendid words to her son, at the moment of departure: "Pierre, my friend, I recommend you that before all things you love, fear and serve God, without in any wise offending Him, if it is possible to you." Standing on the terrace, with a broad gesture that extended as far as Chambéry: "That's what ought to be said to children, that's what all parents, what all masters——"

He stopped, smote his brow.

"My speech!—it's my speech!—I have it—superb! The Château-Bayard, a local legend—I've been looking for the thing for a fortnight—and there it is!"

"It's providential," cried Mme. Bachellery, full of admiration, thinking, nevertheless, the end of the lunch rather serious, "What a man! what a man!"

The little one seemed also much excited; but the impressionable Numa paid no heed. The orator burned beneath his forehead, in his breast, and taken up with his idea,

"The fine thing," he said, seeking about, "the

fine thing would be to date the speech from Château-Bayard——”

“If M. l'avocat would like a small corner for writing——”

“Oh! merely a few notes to jot down. You allow me, ladies—whilst they're serving you the coffee—I'll come back. It's to be able to write the date without lying.”

The servant put him up in a very ancient, little, ground floor room, whose dome-shaped roof still retained some fragments of gilding, and which is claimed to have been Bayard's oratory, just as the vast neighbouring hall with a big old-fashioned four-post bed with chintz curtains is represented as his sleeping-room.

It was good to write between those thick walls, which the closeness of the weather did not pierce, behind the glass door, half-open, casting across the page the light, the perfumes of the little orchard. At first, the orator's pen was not quick enough for the enthusiasm of the idea; he sent one sentence crowding on another's heels in the quick march of the words along the lines of the paper, mostly phrases such as the Southern barrister revelled in, rather hackneyed perhaps, but always eloquent. Suddenly he stopped, his skull empty of words or burdened with the fatigue of the journey and the vapours of the lunch. He then roamed from the oratory to the chamber, speaking loud, exciting himself, listening to the sound of his own step, as if it were that of an illustrious ghost, and sat down again without power to trace a line. Everything was turning round about him, the

walls whitened with chalk, that hypnotizing beam of light. He heard a noise of plates and laughing in the garden far off, very far off, and ended by going into a deep sleep, his nose on his rough draft.

A violent thunderclap started him to his feet. How long had he been there? Rather confused, he went out into the deserted, motionless garden. The odour of the tulip-trees scented the air. In the empty arbour the wasps were flying heavily round the champagne glasses, and sucking the dregs of sugar left in the coffee-cups, which the servant girl was clearing away without noise, overcome by a nervous animal fear at the approach of the storm, and crossing herself at each flash of lightning. She informed Numa that the young lady had a bad headache after lunch, so she had put her in Bayard's chamber to sleep a little, closing the door "very softly" so as not to disturb the gentleman in his work. The two others, the fat lady and the white hat, had gone down into the valley, and would get wet for certain, for there was going to be a—"Look!"

In the direction she indicated, on the jagged crest of the Bauges, the chalky summits of the Grande-Chartreuse enveloped in lightnings like a mysterious Sinai, the sky was darkening with an enormous splash of ink which grew as they looked, and under which the whole valley, with its groves of trees, its golden corn, the roads marked by their lines of white rising dust, the silver waters of the Isère, assumed an extraordinary value of light, the brightness of a slanting, white reflec-

tion, in proportion as the sombre and rumbling menace projected itself. In the distance, Roumes-tan perceived Bompard's canvas helmet, gleaming like a lighthouse.

He went in again, but could not set himself again to his task. Drowsiness did not in this instance paralyse his pen; he felt himself, on the contrary, strangely excited by Alice Bachellery's presence in the neighbouring room. Was she actually still there? He half-opened the door and did not dare to close it again, for fear of disturbing the pretty slumber of the singer, who had thrown herself quite undressed on the bed, in a fascinating disorder of curly tresses, open materials of costume, half-seen white forms.

"Come now, Numa—Bayard's room, what the deuce!"

He positively took himself by the collar like a malefactor, pulled himself together, forcibly seated himself at his table, his head between his hands, stopping up his eyes and his ears, in order the better to absorb himself in the last phrase, which he repeated in a low voice—

"And, gentlemen, those supreme recommendations of Bayard's mother that have come to us in the so sweet language of the middle ages, we would wish that the University of France——"

The storm was enervating him, so heavy, numbing like the shade of certain tropical trees. His head was whirling, intoxicated by an exquisite odour exhaled by the little flowers of the tulip-trees or that mass of blond hair scattered over the bed at the side. Unfortunate minister! It was all

"And, gentlemen, these supreme recommendations of Bayard's mother, that have come to us in the so sweet tongue of the middle ages——"

It was at Chambéry, in view of the old Château of the Dukes of Savoy and of that wonderful amphitheatre of green hills and snowy mountains of which Chateaubriand thought in the presence of Taygetus, that the Grand Master of the University spoke this time, surrounded by embroidered costumes, palms, ermines, big epaulets, dominating a huge crowd gathered by the power of his *verve*, his strong hand still holding the little ivory-handled trowel which had just cemented the first stone of the Lycée.

"We would wish that the University of France should address them to each of its children. Pierre, my friend, I recommend you above all things——."

And whilst he cited those touching words, an emotion caused his hand, his voice, his broad cheeks to tremble, at the memory of the large sweet-smelling room where, in the excitement of a memorable storm, the Chambéry speech had been composed.

CHAPTER XIV

THE VICTIMS

A MORNING. Ten o'clock. The ante-room of the Minister of Public Instruction, a long passage, badly lighted, with sombre hangings and oak wainscoting, is encumbered by a mass of petitioners, sitting or tramping about, more numerous from minute to minute, each new-comer giving his card to the solemn usher with the chain, who takes it, inspects it, and religiously places it without a word by his side, on the little table where he writes in the haggard light of the loop-hole windows dripping with a fine October drizzle.

One of the last arrivals has, however, the honour of stirring up this august impassiveness. He is a big, sunburnt man, with two miniature silver anchors as ear-rings and a voice like a hoarse seal, such as it is heard in the clear morning vapour of Provençal ports.

"Tell him it's Cabantous the pilot. He knows what it's about—he expects me."

"You're not the only one," replies the usher, who smiles discreetly at his own pleasantry.

Cabantous does not see the cleverness of it ;

but he laughs confidently, his mouth stretched to the anchors, and shouldering his way through the crowd which makes way for his soaked umbrella, he goes and sits on a bench beside another patient almost as tanned as himself.

"*Té! vé!* It's Cabantous—*Hé!* good-day."

The pilot excuses himself, he does not recognize the person.

"Valmajour, you know—we knew each other down there, in the arena."

"Good gracious, true!—*Bé!* my lad, you can say Paris has altered you."

The tambourinist is now a gentleman with very long black hair, brushed back behind the ears, artist fashion, which, taken together with his olive tint, his bluish moustache which he is continually fingering, makes him resemble a gipsy of the fair. On the top of that, a crest always raised like a village cock's, the conceit of a handsome fellow and the vanity of a musician, in which is betrayed and overflows the exaggeration of his Southern nature which is apparently calm and untalkative. The failure at the Opéra has not chilled him. Like all actors in like cases he assigns it to a cabal, and in the eyes of his sister and himself the word assumes barbarous, extraordinary proportions, a Sanscrit orthography, the *Kkabbale*, a mysterious animal connected with the belled serpent and the horse of the Apocalypse. And he relates to Cabantous that in a few days he is making his bow at a big *café-concert* on the Boulevard, "an *eskating*, come now!" where he is to figure in some *tableaux vivants* at 200 francs a night.

"Two hundred francs a night!"

The pilot rolls his eyes.

"And, besides, my biography which will be cried in the streets and my portrait life-size on all the walls of Paris, with the costume of a troubadour of ancient times which I shall put on at night when I play my music."

It is that especially which flatters him, the costume. What a pity he was not able to put on his helmet and mailed boots to come and show the minister the magnificent engagement, on proper paper this time, which has been signed without his aid! Cabantous looks at the perforated paper blackened on both sides, and sighs.

"You're very lucky—why, I've been waiting more than a year for my medal. Numa has told me to send in the papers about it. I sent in my papers—since then I've heard nothing about the medal or the papers or anything. I wrote to the Admiralty; they don't know me at the Admiralty. I wrote to the Minister; the Minister did not answer. And the — part of it is that now, without my papers, when I have an interview with the sea-captains about the piloting, the fellows don't want to listen to my reasons. So, seeing that, I thought to myself: let's go and see Numa."

He nearly cried over it, the unlucky pilot. Valmajour comforts him, reassures him, promises to speak to the minister for him, this in an assured tone, his finger at his moustache, like a man who can be refused nothing. Besides, this haughty attitude is not peculiar to him. All these persons

awaiting an audience, old priests with smiling manners in visiting dress, methodical and authoritative professors, dandified painters, with Russian head-dresses, thickset sculptors with spade-shaped fingers, have the same triumphant demeanour. Special friends of the minister, sure of their business, all on arriving have told the usher—

“He’s expecting me.”

All have the conviction that if Roumestan knew they were waiting there! Which gives the ante-room of the Ministry of Public Instruction a very special physiognomy, without anything of those feverish pallors, of those trembling anxieties, which are found in ministerial waiting-rooms.

“With whom is he?” asks Valmajour aloud, approaching the little table.

“The Director of the Opéra.”

“Cadaillac—all right, I know—it’s about my business.”

After the tambourinist’s failure at his theatre, Cadaillac refused to let him have a fresh hearing. Valmajour wanted to go to law; but the minister, who fears the advocates and the minor papers, begged the musician to withdraw his appointment, guaranteeing a large indemnity. It is that indemnity which they are doubtless discussing at that moment, and not without some animation, for Numa’s clarion voice pierces every instant the double door of the cabinet which is at last opened brutally.

“It is not my protégée, it’s yours.”

The stout Cadaillac goes out with these words, crosses the ante-room with furious paces, jostling

against the usher who advances between two rows of recommendations.

"You've only to give my name."

"Let him only know I'm here."

"Tell him it's Cabantous."

The other listens to nobody, walks very gravely, with some visiting-cards in his hand, and, behind him, the door which he leaves half-open displays the ministerial cabinet, full of light from its three windows looking on to the garden, a whole panel being covered by the mantle doubled with ermine of M. de Fontanes painted at the foot.

With some surprise on his cadaverous face, the usher returns and calls—

"Monsieur Valmajour."

The musician is not astonished, not he, at passing in thus before the rest.

Since the morning he has his portrait advertised on the walls of Paris. He is now a public character and the minister would not let him now languish in the draughts of a station. Conceited, fatuous, smiling, there he is planted in the centre of the sumptuous cabinet where some secretaries are in course of taking down cardboard boxes and drawers in a frightened search. Roumestan, furious, thunders, scolds, his hands in his pockets—

"But really those papers, *qué diable!* They've been lost, that pilot's papers. Really, gentlemen, there's a want of order here."

He perceives Valmajour. "Ah! it's you," and he jumps at him at a bound, whilst the backs of secretaries flee panic-stricken by the side-doors, carrying off piles of cardboard boxes

“*Ah, ça*, when are you going to stop persecuting me with your dog-music—you haven’t enough with one oven? How many d’you want? There you are now, they tell me, on the walls in costume—and what is this nonsense that’s come to my ears? That your biography!—A tissue of stupidities and lies. You know well you’re no more a prince than I am; that these parchments of which people speak have never existed but in your imagination.”

With a brow-beating and brutal gesture he held the unhappy man tight by the middle of his jacket and shook him as he spoke. To begin with, that skating rink had not got a *sou*. It was a mere puffing show. He would not get his pay, whilst he would involve his patron’s name in the shame of that dirty advertisement. The papers would begin their jokes again, Roumestan and Valmajour, the booby of the ministry. And warming up at the remembrances of the insults, his broad cheeks swollen by a family fit of choler, an Aunt Portal attack, more terrifying in the solemn and administrative surroundings where personalities are bound to disappear before situations, he shouted to him at the top of his powerful lungs—

“But go, you scoundrel, go!—Nobody wants to have anything more to do with you; they’ve had enough of your tomfoolery.”

Valmajour, stunned, was powerless, stammering “All right—all right,” with an imploring look at the pitying face of Méjean, the only one whom the master’s wrath had not put to flight, and at

mestan appeared, ready to go out, elegantly hatted, an ample cloak hiding her figure. And with that air of serenity which had illumined her pretty face during the last five months, she asked: "Have you a Council to-day?—good-day, M. Méjean."

"But yes—Council—meeting—everything!"

"I wanted to ask you to come as far as mama's—I'm lunching there—Hortense would be so glad."

"You see, it is not possible."

He looked at his watch.

"I must be at Versailles at noon."

"Then I'll wait for you, I'll take you to the station."

He hesitated a second, merely a second.

"Good—I'll sign here, and we'll be off."

Whilst he was writing Rosalie whispered to Méjean news of his sister. The return of winter affected her, she was forbidden to go out. Why didn't he go and see her? She had need of all her friends. Méjean gave a gesture of discouraged sorrow: "Oh! I——"

"But yes—but yes! It's not all over with you. It's only a whim: I'm sure it won't last."

She saw things in a rosy light, and wished all her people to be happy like herself. Oh! so happy and with so perfect a happiness that she fostered the discreet superstition of never admitting it. Roumestan himself talked about his good fortune on all sides, both to the indifferent and to intimates, with a comical pride: "We shall call him the child of the ministry!" and he laughed at his phrase till he cried.

Verily, for anybody who knew of the life he led outside, the town-house shamelessly inaugurated with receptions and an open table, this husband, so attentive, so affectionate, who spoke with tears in his eyes of his coming paternity, appeared indefinable, at peace in his lie, sincere in his effusiveness, routing the opinions of any one who did not know the dangerous complications of Southern natures.

"I'll take you, certainly," he said to his wife, getting into the carriage.

"But if they're waiting for you?"

"Ah! so much the worse—they will wait—we shall be longer together."

He took Rosalie's arm under his, and nestling against her like a child, observed—

"*Té*, you see, it's only then I feel well. Your gentleness soothes me, your coolness fortifies me. That Cadaillac has put me in a hole—a man without conscience, without moral."

"You didn't know him then?"

"He carries on that theatre; it's shameful!"

"It's true the engagement of that Mlle. Bachelery—why did you let him do it? A girl who has everything false about her, her youth, her voice, even to her eyebrows."

Numa felt himself reddening. It was he now who fixed them on, with the tips of his big fingers, the little one's eyebrows. The mama had taught him.

"To whom, pray, does she belong, this nothing of anything? The *Messenger* spoke the other day of high influences, of mysterious protection."

"I don't know—to Cadaillac, no doubt."

He turned away to hide his embarrassment, and suddenly threw himself back in his seat, panic-stricken.

"What is it now?" inquired Rosalie, looking also through the window.

The skating-rink advertisement, immense, in loud tones, which stood out in the rainy, greyish sky, repeated at every street corner, at every place free on a bare wall or on enclosure-planks, a gigantic troubadour, surrounded by tableaux vivants, in yellow, green, blue, with the ochre of a tabor thrown across.

"My executioner!" remarked Roumestan with comic despair.

And Rosalie gently chiding—

"No—your victim—and if he were the only one! But another has taken fire at your enthusiasm."

"Who's that?"

"Hortense."

She then told him about what she was at last certain of, despite the mysteries made by the girl, her love for the peasant, which she had at first thought a mere fantasy, and which now disquieted her as a moral aberration on the part of her sister.

The minister grew indignant.

"Is it possible?—that rascal, that bumpkin!"

"She sees him with the imagination, and especially in the light of your legends, your inventions for which she has not been able to make allowance. That's why this advertisement, this grotesque

illustration which irritates you fills me on the contrary with joy. I fancy that her hero will seem so ridiculous to her that she will no longer venture to love him. Without that, I don't know what would happen to us. Consider my father's despair—see yourself, you, as Valmajour's brother-in-law! Ah! Numa, Numa—poor involuntary dupe-maker."

He did not defend himself, being irritated at himself, at his "accursed South" which he could not control.

"Well, you must remain ever as you are, nestling against me, my dear council, my holy protection. You are the only kind, indulgent one, who understands me and loves me."

He held her small gloved hand under his lips, and spoke with such conviction that tears, real tears, reddened his eyelids. Then, warmed up again, expanded by this effusion, he felt better; and when, on arriving at the Place Royale, he had helped his wife to get down with a thousand tender cares, it was in a pleased tone, free from any remorse, that he called to his coachman: "Rue de Londres—quick!"

Rosalie, slow in walking, vaguely heard the address and it pained her. Not that she had the least suspicion; but he had just told her he was going to the Saint Lazare station. Why did his acts never answer to his words?

A further disquiet awaited her in her sister's room, where she perceived on entering that she had stopped a discussion between Hortense and Audiberte, who kept her stormy expression, the

ribbon quivering on her fury-like hair. Rosalie's presence restrained her, as was visible at her lips, at her sullenly contracted eyebrows; however, as the young wife asked for news, she was obliged to answer, and then talked feverishly of the "eskating," of the fine terms proposed to them, then, amazed at her calmness, asked almost in solently—

"Won't madam come to hear my brother? It's worth the trouble, at least, merely to see him in his costume!"

As described by her in her peasant phraseology, from the cap to the curved point of the shoes, this ridiculous costume inflicted tortures on poor Hortense, who did not dare raise her eyes to her sister. Rosalie excused herself; the state of her health did not admit of the theatre. Besides, there were in Paris certain places of amusement where all women could not go. The peasant checked her at the first words.

"Pardon—I shall go there myself and I think I am as good as another woman. I have never done any ill, I haven't; I have always fulfilled my duties of *religion*."

She raised her voice, with none of her former timidity, as if she had acquired rights in the house. But Rosalie was much too kindly, too far above this poor ignorant person, to humble her, especially as she thought of Numa's responsibilities. Then, with all the wit of her heart, all her delicacy, with those words of truth which heal whilst burning a little, she tried to make her understand that her brother had not succeeded, that he would never

succeed in that implacable Paris, and that rather than engage in a humiliating struggle, descending into degrading depths, they would do much better to return to the country, to buy back their house, everything, for which means would be provided them, and to forget in their laborious life, in the bosom of nature, the bitternesses of this unlucky expedition.

The peasant let her go right to the end, without once interrupting, merely darting at Hortense the irony of her malevolent eyes as if to excite her to reply. Finally, seeing that the girl did not wish to say anything yet, she declared coldly that they would not go away, that her brother had engagements at Paris of every kind—of every kind—which it was impossible for him to miss. Thereupon she threw on her arm the heavy wet cloak, which had remained on the back of a chair, made a hypocritical bow to Rosalie—"A real good-day, madam—and thank you, at least"—and made off, followed by Hortense.

In the ante-room, lowering her voice because of the servants—

"Sunday night, *qué ?*—half-past ten, without fail."

And she added, urgently, authoritatively—

"You certainly owe him that, come now, to your *poor* friend, to hearten him up. First of all, what d'you risk? I shall come myself for you—I shall myself bring you back."

Seeing her still hesitate, she said further, almost out loud, in a diapason of menace—

"I say, are you his betrothed, yes or no?"

"I'll come—I'll come," said the girl, frightened.

When she came back, Rosalie, who saw her absent-minded and gloomy, asked her—

"What are you thinking of, my darling? Is it still your romance that continues? It must be well advanced for the long time you've been at it!" she cried gaily, taking her by the waist.

"Oh, yes, very far advanced."

With a dull tone of melancholy Hortense went on, after a silence—

"But it's my conclusion that I don't see."

She loved him no more; perhaps even she had never loved him. Transformed by absence and the "sweet brilliancy" which misfortune lent to Abencerage, he had appeared to her at a distance as the man of her destiny. She had thought it a proud thing to engage her life to him who was being abandoned by all, success and his patrons. But on her return, what pitiless clarity, what terror at seeing how she had been mistaken!

Audiberte's first visit shocked her, to begin with, by her new manners, too free, too familiar, and the conspirator's glances with which she informed her in a whisper: "He's coming to fetch me—sh!—say nothing!" It seemed to her very prompt, very bold, especially the idea of introducing the young man into her parents' house. But the peasant woman wanted to hasten matters. And suddenly Hortense understood her mistake, at the sight of that vulgar fellow brushing his hair back, with an inspired movement, shaping the Provençal sombrero

on his head in character, always handsome but with a visible anxiety to appear so.

Instead of humiliating himself a little, of getting himself forgiven for the generous impulse she had had towards him, he kept his victorious, *fatuous* air of conquest, and without speaking—for he would hardly have known what to say—he treated the refined Parisian as he would have treated the Combette girl in a similar case, took her by the waist with the gesture of a soldier-troubadour and wanted to draw her to him. She drew away with a repulsion of all her nerves, leaving him bewildered and silly, whilst Audiberte quickly interposed and scolded her brother in very forcible language. What were those manners? Had he learnt them in Paris, in the Faubourg *Saint-Germain*, no doubt, among his duchesses?

“At least wait till she’s your wife! There now!”

And to Hortense—

“He loves you so much—his blood’s going all rotten, *pécairé*!”

From that time, when Valmajour came for his sister, he thought he must assume the sombre and fatal mien of melodrama. The girl might have been touched by it; but the poor fellow seemed decidedly too much of a nonentity. He only knew how to stroke the fur of his otter-skin cap as he related his successes in the noble Faubourg or the rivalries of the stage. He spoke to her one day for an hour on the commonness of the handsome Mayol, who had abstained from congratulating him after a concert, and he repeated the whole time—

"That's him, your Mayol—*Bé!* He's not polite, your Mayol."

And always the vigilant attitudes of Audiberte, her severity as gendarme of morality, in the presence of these two cold lovers. Ah! if she had been able to divine in Hortense's soul the terror, the disgust at her frightful mistake!

However, she had promised, and every day she was harassed with new demands; for instance, the première of the skating rink, whither the peasant woman wanted to drag her by sheer force, counting on the success, the enthusiasm of the applause to carry her off her feet. And after a long resistance the poor girl had at last consented to this sortie at night without her mother's knowledge, involving at the same time humiliating lies and complicities; she had yielded through fear, through weakness, perhaps also in the hope of regaining there her original vision, the vanished mirage, of rekindling the flame so hopelessly extinguished.

at 4 fr. 50, puffs of dressmakers, alternating with the portraits of the tabor-player, whose biography was being hawked about amidst a deafening din, in which the murmuring of the crowd, the knocking of the balls on the cloth of the English billiard table, the calls for refreshments, the scraps of music blended with patriotic fusillades that came from the bottom of the hall, were dominated by a perpetual clinking of roller skates going to and fro on a broad asphalted space, surrounded by balustrades.

Anxious, dazed, now paling, now blushing beneath her veil, Hortense walked behind the Provençale, followed her with difficulty through a labyrinth of small round tables round which sat women, two and two, and drank, their elbows on the table, a cigarette at their lips, with a bored look. Here and there, against the wall, a laden counter, and behind it a girl standing, her eyes circled with kohl, her mouth rouged. And this white, this red of painted flesh, this vermilioned smile, were reproduced in all the women, like a livery which they wore of pale, nocturnal apparitions.

Sinister also the slow promenade of those men who pressed themselves, insolent and brutal, between the tables, sending to right and left the smoke of their big cigars, the insult of their chaffering, approaching to see the display nearer. And what best gave the impression of a market was the cosmopolite public talking broken French, an hotel public, that had arrived the day before and came there in travelling costume, Scotch

caps, threadbare jackets, tweeds still steeped in the fogs of the Channel, and the Muscovite furs hastening to unfreeze, and the long black beards, the boorish airs from the borders of the Spree masking the grins of fauns and the barbarities of Tartars, and Ottoman fezzes on collarless coats, negroes in full dress, shining like the silk of their hats, little Japanese in European dress, neat and correct.

"*Boun Diou !* How ugly he is !" suddenly cried Audiberte before a grave Chinaman, his long pigtail down the back of his blue costume ; or she stopped, and nudging her companion's elbow—

"*Vé, vé !* a bride"—she showed her, stretched on two chairs, one of which supported her white satin boots with silver heels, a woman all in white, with corsage open, her train unrolled, and the orange flowers piercing in her hair the lace of a short mantilla. Then, suddenly scandalized at words that enlightened her about this fortuitous orange-tree, the Provençale added mysteriously : "*One* poison, you know !" Quickly, in order to get Hortense away from the pernicious example, she drew her into the enclosure in the middle, where right at the further end, holding the place of the choir in a church, the theatre arose under intermittent electric flames falling from two globes.

Here people rested from the tumultuous scandal of the promenades : families of small *bourgeois*, storekeepers of the district. Few women. You might have thought yourself in some kind of

theatre, had it not been for the horrible, pervading noise which always predominated with a regular, obsessing roll over the skating on the asphalt, drowning even the brass, even the drums of the orchestra, making everything impossible but the mimicry of the tableaux vivants.

The curtain was being lowered at that moment on a patriotic scene, the lion of Belfort, enormous, in cardboard, engirt with soldiers in triumphant poses on crumbled ramparts, their *képis* at the end of their guns, following the measure of an inaudible "Marseillaise." The Provençale grew excited; her eyes started out of her head, and as she put Hortense in her seat, she exclaimed—

"We're all right here, *qué?* But lift up your veil—don't tremble—you're trembling. There's no risk with me."

The girl answered nothing, haunted by that slow, outrageous promenade, into which she had been plunged, among all those pallid masks. And there in front of her she found them again, those horrible masques with bleeding lips, in the grimaces of two clowns, with a bell in each hand, carolling a tune from "Martha" amid their gambols; a real gnome music, formless, well suited to the harmonic babelism of the rink. Then the curtain fell again, and the peasant, who had got on her feet ten times and sat down again, excited, adjusting her headdress, exclaimed suddenly as she followed the programme, "The Mont de Cordoue—the *cigales*—Farandole—it's beginning. *Vé, vé!*"

The curtain going up again revealed on the

Behind came with deliberate steps, pushing from his knee a tabor covered with gilt paper, the great troubadour of the advertisements, in close-fitting tights, one leg yellow with blue footgear, the other blue with yellow footgear, and a satin vest, a velvet cap shading a face that had remained brown in spite of the grease-paint and of which you could only clearly see a moustache stiffened with Hungarian pomade.

"Oh!" cried Audiberte in ecstasy.

The farandole was drawn up on both sides of the stage in front of the big-winged *cigales*, the troubadour in the centre saluted, with assured and vanquishing mien. The serenade began, rustic and faint of sound, scarcely passing beyond the stage. The public looked on without understanding. Valmajour began another piece, which was received from the first bars with laughter, murmurs, exclamations. Audiberte took Hortense's hand—

"It's the cabal—you watch!"

The cabal here uttered a few cries of "Sh!—louder!" and jokes like that which a hoarse-voiced girl shouted at Valmajour's complicated mimicry—

"Have you done, you performing rabbit?"

Then the skating and the billiards went on again, the noise overpowering the flute and tabor which the musician persisted in playing right to the end of the serenade. After which he saluted, advanced to the footlights. His lips were seen moving, sketching out some words.

"It came to me—a hole—three holes The bird of good God——"

His desperate gesture, understood by the orchestra, was the signal for a ballet in which the *cirales* were enlaced with hours for the purpose of poses plastiques, undulating, lascivious dances, under rainbow Bengal-fire that reached even the troubadour's pointed shoes, who continued his talor mimicry before the castle of his ancestors in a glory of apotheosis.

And that was Hortense's romance! That is what Paris had made of it.

The clear note of the old clock hanging in her room having struck one, she got up from the easy-chair, into which she had fallen exhausted on her return, glanced around her sweet virgin's nest, with the comforting warmth of a dying fire.

"What am I doing here? Why haven't I gone to bed?"

She no longer remembered, feeling only a wounding of her whole nature, and a buzzing in her head that beat upon her brow. She walked two paces, noticed she had still her hat on, her cloak, and the whole scene returned to her. The departure from that place after the fall of the curtain, their return through the hideous market more brightly illuminated towards the end, drunken bookmakers fighting at a bar, cynical voices whispering a price as she passed, then the scene with Audiberte on their going out, she wishing her to go and congratulate her brother, her anger in the cab, the insults that creature hurled at her in order presently

to humble herself, to kiss her hands in excuse ; all that, confused and dancing in her memory with clowns' antics, discordances of bells, of cymbals, soarings of many-coloured flames about the ridiculous troubadour to whom she had given her heart. A physical horror overcame her at the idea.

"No, no, never—I'd rather die !"

Suddenly she observed in the glass in front of her a hollow-cheeked spectre, with narrow shoulders thrust forward in a gesture. It looked rather like her, but much more like the Princess d'Anhalt, whose sad symptoms she detailed at Arvillard with pitying curiosity, and who had just died at the beginning of the winter.

"Come ! Come !"

She bent forward, approached again, recalled the inexplicable kindness they had all showed her there, her mother's fear, the tender affectionateness of old Bouchereau at her departure, and she understood. At last she had it, her conclusion. It came quite by itself. She had been seeking for it long enough.

CHAPTER XVI

AUDIBERTE'S REVENGE

"**M**ADemoiselle is very ill. Madame will not see anybody."

For the tenth time in ten days Audiberte received the same answer. Motionless before that heavy door, such as one hardly finds any nowadays except under the arcades of the Place Royale, and which being shut seemed to bar to her for ever the Le Quesnoy's old dwelling,

"All right," she said. "I shall not come back any more. It's they who'll call on me now."

And she went away thoroughly upset, amid the animation of that commercial quarter. She did not take notice of the infernal noise; her malevolent brain was conceiving brutal thoughts, terrible reactions of her defeated will. And she went along, not feeling the fatigue, traversed on foot, so as to economize the omnibus, the long distance from the Marais to the Rue de l'Abbaye-Montmartre.

Quite recently, after travelling through lodgings

of all kinds, hotels, furnished apartments, from which they were each time expelled on account of the tabor, they had come and let themselves down there, in a new house which was occupied at bricklayers' prices by a gang of loose women, Bohemians, agents, families of adventurers such as you see in seaports, watching the waves from which they always expect something. Here it is fortune they are spying for. The rent was very dear for them, now especially as the skating rink was bankrupt. However, in this freshly painted bark, its door open at every hour for the different unavoidable professions of the lodgers, together with the quarrels taking place, the tabor disturbed nobody. It was the taborist who was disturbed. The puffs, the advertisements, the close-fitting tights and his fine moustaches had made havoc among the ladies of the skating rink. He knew some actors of the Batignolles, some *café-concert* singers, quite a nice company that met in an inn along the Boulevard Rochechouart called the "Paillasson."

This Paillasson, where his time was spent, in a boozy lounging, in messing about cards, drinking bocks, was the foe, the terror of Audiberte, the occasion of savage tempers under which the two men bent their backs as under a tropical storm, free to curse their big-skirted despot in company, speaking of her in the mysterious and hateful tone of schoolboys or of servants: "What did she say? How much did she give you?" and having an understanding to go out behind her heels. Audiberte knew it, watched them, worked

outside, impatient to return, and that day especially, as she went away in the morning. She stopped a second as she was going up, and heard neither tabor nor flute.

"Ah! the idle scamp—he's still at his Paillasson."

But, as soon as she entered, her father ran up to her and averted the explosion.

"Don't shout! There's some one for you. A gentleman from the *ministry*."

The gentleman was awaiting her in the "drawing-room," a drawing-room of which the peasant woman was very proud. And Méjean was considering, full of compassion, the Provençal furniture buried in that dentist's waiting-room, in the crude light of two curtainless windows. Audiberte's haughty, very pure, profile, in her Sunday ribbon, itself too de-countryfied in that Parisian fifth floor, put the finishing touch to his pity for these victims of Roumestan; and he began gently the explanation of his visit. The minister, wishing Valmajour to avoid fresh misconceptions for which he felt himself responsible to a certain point, was sending them 5,000 francs to compensate them for their disturbance and to repatriate them. He took the orders from his pocket, placed them on an old walnut coffer.

"Then we'll have to go?" asked the woman, meditatively, without moving.

"M. le Ministre desires it to be so as soon as possible. He is eager to hear you are at home again, happy as before."

Valmajour senior risked a glance at the orders.

"As for me, it seems reasonable. *Dé qué n'en disés ?*"

She said nothing, waited for the sequel, which Méjean was getting ready, turning his portfolio on this side and that. "To these 5,000 francs we shall add another 5,000—as here—in order to get back—in order to get back—" He was strangling with emotion. It was a cruel commission Rosalie had given him in that matter. Ah ! It often costs something to pass for a quiet, strong man ; people ask much more of you than of others. He added very quickly : "The portrait of Mlle. Le Quesnoy."

"Well, at last—now we've come to the point. The portrait. I knew quite well, *pardi !* So you think you can make us come from the other end of France, that you could promise everything to us who asked for nothing, and that then we could be put out like dogs who have misbehaved themselves. Take back your money, sir. You can tell them for certain we're not going, and we shall not give them back the portrait. It's a document, that. I keep it in my bag. It never leaves me ; and I shall show it in Paris, with what is written on it, that the world may know all those Roumestans are a family of liars—of liars."

She foamed at the mouth.

"Mlle. Le Quesnoy is very ill," said Méjean very grave.

"*Avai !*"

"She is about to leave Paris and will probably never come back—alive."

Audiberte did not answer, but the mute laughter

moods of λύω. When contentious matters were lacking, Guilloche, who was a B.A., harnessed himself to this original work, from which he drew some profit.

Placed *au courant* of the affair, he declared it excellent. The minister would be brought to book, the newspapers would be given the tip; the portrait of itself alone was worth a gold mine. Only he required time, and advances of money in hard cash for running about the town, as the Puyfourcat inheritance seemed to him a pure mirage. The peasant woman's rapacity, already put cruelly to the ordeal, was racked with anguish, the more so as Valmajour, who was in great request at the *salons* during the first winter, no longer set foot in the Faubourg *Saint-Germain*.

"So much the worse—I'll work. I'll make things hum, *zou!*"

The energetic little coif of Arles moved actively in the big new building, went up and down stairs, hawking from floor to floor its story about the minister, it grew excited, it shook, it leapt, and suddenly in a mysterious voice was heard: "Besides, there's the portrait." With a furtive, dubious look, like the hawkers of certain photographs in back streets, she would show the thing.

"A pretty girl, at any rate! And you've read what's written at the bottom? I think that with that we've got them," she would add with a furious gesture of strangling.

One day Audiberte was invited to go to the police commissary of the district. She ran there with all speed, persuaded that the matter referred

to Cousin Puyfourcat, went in smiling, her coif set high, and departed at the end of a quarter of an hour upset by the very peasant-like fear of the gendarme, who at the first words had made her give up the portrait and sign a receipt for 10,000 francs by which she abandoned all proceedings. Certainly she obstinately refused to leave the town, persisted in believing in her brother's genius, ever retaining at the back of her eyes the dazzling effect of that long line of carriages, one winter's evening, in the court of the illuminated ministry.

On her return, she hinted to her menfolk, who were more timorous than herself, that they must not talk any more about the affair ; but said no syllable about the money received. Guilloche, who suspected it, that money, used all his methods to get his share of it, and having only got the minimum compensation cherished a terrible rancour against the Valmajours.

" Well ! " he said one morning to Audiberte, whilst she was brushing on the banister the best suit of the musician who was still in bed. "*Et bien !* you should be content. He's dead at last."

" Who ? "

" Why, Puyfourcat, the cousin. It's in the paper."

" Father ! Brother ! Quick—the legacy ! "

They were all stirred to their souls, panting around the infernal Guilloche, who unfolded the *Officiel* and read to them very slowly as follows :
" Under date of 1st October, 1876, the tribunal of Mostaganem has, at the request of the adminis-

tration of the domains, ordered the publication and advertising of the legacies hereinafter.—Pope-lino (Louis) labourer.’—That’s not it.—‘Puyfourcat (Dosithée).’ ”

“That’s him,” said Audiberte.

The old man thought it his duty to wipe his eyes.

“*Pécaïré ! Poor Dosithée !* ”

“ ‘Puyfourcat, deceased at Mostaganem the 14th January, 1874, born at Valmajour, Commune of Aps.’ ”

The peasant woman grown impatient inquired—
“How much ? ”

“Three francs, thirty-five *cintimes* ! ” cried Guilloche with the voice of a coalheaver ; and leaving them the paper that they might verify their mistake, he went off with a burst of laughter which went from floor to floor even into the street, afforded merriment to the whole of the great village of Montmartre where the legend of the Valmajours circulated.

Three francs thirty-five the legacy of the Puyfourcats ! Audiberte affected to laugh at it louder than the others ; but the frightful desire of vengeance that brooded in her against the Roumestans, responsible in her eyes for all their misfortunes, only grew fiercer and fiercer, seeking a vent, a means, the first weapon within reach.

The papa’s face was singular during this disaster. Whilst his daughter was exhausted with fatigue and rage, he, looking blooming, careless, no longer cherishing even his former professional jealousy, seemed to have arranged for

himself somewhere outside a tranquil existence apart from his own kin. He decamped immediately after lunch ; and sometimes in the morning when brushing his clothes he let drop from his pockets a dry fig, a *berlingot*, *canissons*, the origin of which the old man explained away somehow.

He had met a peasant woman in the street, some one from down there, who would come and see them.

Audiberte shook her head.

"*Avai !* if I followed you !"

The truth is that whilst sauntering about Paris he had discovered in the Saint-Denis quarter a big provision shop, where he had entered, lured by the inscription and by the temptations of an exotic shop-front, with coloured fruits, with silver paper, shining bright in the fog of a populous street. The store, in which he had become a regular diner and friend, well known to Southerners become Parisians, was entitled—

"AUX PRODUITS DU MIDI."

And never a truer label. There, everything was a product of the South, from the masters, M. and Mme. Mèfre, two products of the Midi Gras, with the prominent nose of Roumestan, the flashing eyes, the accent, the phrases, the demonstrative welcome of Provence, down to their shop assistants, familiar, thinking nothing of shouting out to the office in drawling tones: "I say, Mèfre, where have you put that sausage, eh?" Down to the little Mèfres, impish and dirty, running at every instant the risk of being

disembowelled, scalped, put in the soup, dipping their fingers nevertheless in all the open barrels; down to the buyers gesticulating, chattering for hours, for the acquisition of a *barquette* of two sous, or sitting on chairs in a circle to discuss the qualities of the garlic sausage and the sausage with pepper, Aunt Portal's whole vocabulary in boisterous exchange, whilst a "dear brother" in black dress, a friend of the house, would buy some salt fish, and the flies, a quantity of flies, attracted by all the sugar of these fruits, of these sweets, of these almost oriental pastries, would buzz about even in mid-winter, kept alive by the cooking warmth. And when a Parisian got impatient at the dawdling of the shopmen, at the absent-minded indifference of the shopkeepers continuing their chat from one place to another, whilst weighing and measuring all wrong, you should have heard the talk—

"*Té, vé*, if you're in a hurry, the door it is open, and the tramway it passes in front, you know well."

In this environment of compatriots, old Valmajour was received with open arms. M. and Mme. Mère remembered having seen him at the fair of Beaucaire, at a tabor competition. Among old people of the South, this fair of Beaucaire, to-day vanished, existing only in name, has remained as a bond of masonic brotherhood. In our Southern provinces, it was the fairy time of the year, the distraction of all those stunted existences; preparations were made for it long in advance, and it was talked about long after. It was promised as a reward to the wife, to the chil-

dren, always bringing them back, if they could not be taken with one, a Spanish lace, a toy which one found at the bottom of the bag. The fair of Beaucaire, it was still, under a pretext of commerce, a fortnight, a month of free, exuberant, unforeseen life, of Bohemian camping out. People slept here and there at a native's house, in the shops, on the desks, in the open street, under the stretched canvas of the wagons, in the warm light of the July stars.

Oh ! for the business without the wearisomeness of the shop, business despatched whilst dining, at the door, in shirt-sleeves.

At the Mères' every one felt at ease, rather like at the Beaucaire fair ; and indeed, the shop resembled in its picturesque disorder an improvised caravan and store of produce of the South. The old man would go inside, his nostrils distended, *overflowing with greedy eagerness, greatly excited*. He who in the case of his children shirked the least work and when he had sewn a button on his waistcoat wiped his brow for hours, boasting of having performed a labour of Hercules, was here ever ready to lend a hand, to take off his coat to nail, to unfasten boxes, picking up here and there a *berlingot*, an olive, enlivening the work by his monkey tricks and his tales ; and once a week, the day of the *brandade*, he even worked late at the shop so as to help to send off the consignments.

This Southern dish among all the rest, the *brandade* of turbot, can hardly be got except at the "Produits du Midi" ; it is the genuine, white,

fine-flaked, creamy, with a dash of *aïol*, such as it is manufactured at Nîmes, whence the Mèfres get it. It arrives on Thursday evening at seven by the "Rapide" and is distributed on Friday morning in Paris to all the good clients inscribed in the big ledger of the firm. It is on that journal of commerce with its worn pages, smelling of spices and spotted with oil, that the history is written of the conquest of Paris by the Southerners, that you may see in file high fortunes, political, industrial situations, celebrated names of advocates, deputies, ministers, and among all, that of Numa Roumestan, the Vendéan of the South, pillar of the altar and of the throne.

For that line in which Roumestan is inscribed, the Mèfres would throw the whole book in the fire. It is he who best represents their ideas in religion, in politics, in everything. As Mme Mefre says, and she is even more impassioned than her hus-

so much to do in the two Chambers, they did not see him any more, *pécairé* ! but he remained the loyal customers of the " Produits " ; and he was always the first attended to.

One Thursday night, about ten, all the pots of *brandade* being prepared, sealed up, in fine order on the bench, the Mèfre family, the assistants, old Valmajour, all the products of the South in their entirety, sweating, panting, were resting with that expansive air of people who have well accomplished a hard task and were refreshing themselves with *biscottes* in mulled wine, with syrup of barley, " something sweet, you know ! " for Southerners do not much like anything strong. Among the town populace as in the country parts, alcoholic intoxication is almost unknown. The race has an instinctive fear and horror of it. It feels itself drunk from birth, drunk without drinking.

And it is very true that the wind and the sun distill into it a terrible alcohol of nature, whose effects all those who are born down there feel more or less. Some have only a little extra amount of it, which unloosens the tongue and gestures, makes life look rose-coloured with sympathies everywhere, lights up the eyes, broadens the streets, levels obstacles, doubles boldness and comforts the timid ; others, more affected, like the little Valmajour, Aunt Portal, reach at once a blind delirium. You should see our votive fêtes in Provence, peasants standing on the tables, howling, stamping with their big yellow shoes, calling : " Waiter, the gassy stuff ! " a whole village rolling drunk after a few bottles of lemonade. And those

sudden prostrations of the intoxicated, those collapses of the whole being following on anger, on enthusiasm, with the suddenness of a sun-stroke or of a shadow in a March sky; who is the Southerner who has not felt them?

Without being deliriously affected like his daughter, old Valmajour was born with a considerable amount of the alcohol in him; and that night his barley drink transported him with a mad mirth that made him grimace in the middle of the shop, glass in hand, his mouth distorted, all his amusing tomfoolery. The Mèfres, and their assistants were writhing with laughter on the grain sacks.

“Oh! that Valmajour!”

Suddenly the old man's hilarity disappeared, his clownish gesture was broken off short by the appearance before him of a Provençal coif, all quivering.

CHAPTER XVII

ROSALIE'S ORDEAL

MADAME ROUMESTAN started at the light knock at the door of her room, as if surprised in some guilty act, and pushing back the delicately shaped drawer of her Louis XV commode, before which she was bending, almost kneeling, she asked—

“Who is there? What do you want, Polly?”

“A letter for madame—it’s very urgent,” answered the Englishwoman. Rosalie took the letter and quickly shut the door again. An unknown, vulgar handwriting, on the commonest paper, with the “Personal and Urgent” of requests for help. Never would a Parisian chambermaid have disturbed her for so little. She threw it on the commode, deferring the reading of it till later, and returned quickly to her drawer which contained the marvels of the previous baby outfit. For eight years, since the drama, she had not opened it, fearing to find her tears again there; nor even since her pregnancy, owing to a very motherly superstition, for fear of yet again bringing misfortune on herself, with that premature caress

given to the child who is going to be born, over its little trousseau.

She had, that valiant woman, all the nervousnesses of a woman, all her tremblings, her delicate shrinkings as of a mimosa ; society, which judges without understanding, thought her cold, even as the ignorant imagine flowers do not live. Now, however, her hope being six months old, it was necessary to take all those little objects from their folds of mourning and enclosure, to visit them, perhaps to transform them ; because fashion changes even for the newly born, they are not always beribboned in the same way. It was for this intimate work that Rosalie had shut herself in carefully ; and in the big, busy, scribbling ministry there was certainly nothing as serious, as moving as that woman on her knees before an open drawer, her heart beating and her hands trembling.

She lifted the somewhat yellowed lace which preserved with perfumes all that white of innocent toilettes, the dress for the baptism, the doll stockings. She saw herself again down there at Orsay, gently languid, working for entire hours under the shade of the tall catalpa whose white calices fell into the work-basket among her materials and her fine embroidery scissors, all her thought concentrated on a point of cutting-out which bounded her dreams and hours. What illusions then, what beliefs ! What a joyous branching in the leaves over her head ! In herself, what an awakening of tender, new sensations ! In one day life had taken it all back from her, suddenly And her despair came back to her heart, her husband's

treachery, the loss of the child, in proportion as she unfolded her "layette."

The sight of the first little garment, all ready to pass, that which is got ready on the cradle at the moment of birth, the sleeves one in the other, the arms separated, the caps swollen in their roundness, made her burst into tears. It seemed to her that her child had lived, that she had kissed and known it. A boy. Oh! certainly, a boy, and strong, and handsome, and even at the outset possessing his grandfather's serious, deep eyes. He would be eight to-day, with long curly hair falling over a big collar: at that age they still belong to the mother who marches them about, dresses them, makes them work! Ah! cruel, cruel life.

But gradually as she drew out and handled the small objects, their flowered embroideries, their snowy laces, she grew calm. Well, no, life is not so malevolent; and as long as it lasts one must keep up one's courage. She had lost all her courage at that deadly turning, imagining it was all over with her in respect to belief in loving, in being a wife and mother, that the only thing left for her was to observe the luminous past going far away like a passing river-bank one looks at with regret. Then, after mournful years, beneath her heart's cold snow the revival had slowly blossomed, and here it was flourishing again in that quite little one which was about to be born, which she felt to be already vigorous by the terrible little kicks it used to give her during the night. And her Numa, so changed, so kind, cured of those brutal violences!

There were, indeed, still in him weaknesses she did not like, those Italian peculiarities from which he could not defend himself ; but " that's politics," as he would say. Further, she no longer cherished the illusions of the early days ; she knew that in order to live happily one must be contented with the approximate in all things, carve for oneself full happiness in the half-happiness existence gives us.

There was another knock at the door. M. Méjean, who wanted to speak with madame.

" Good. I'm coming."

She joined him in the small drawing-room which he was pacing up and down, greatly agitated.

" I have a confession to make to you," he said in the rather brusque tone of familiarity which a friendship already old authorized, of which they had made a brotherly bond. " I ended that wretched affair a few days ago. I did not tell you, so as to keep this longer."

He handed her Hortense's portrait.

" At last ! Oh ! how happy she will be, poor darling."

She grew tenderly affectionate as she beheld the pretty face of her sister sparkling with health and youth under her Provençal disguise, read at the bottom of the portrait the very fine and very firm handwriting : " I believe in you and I love you.—Hortense Le Quesnoy." Then, reflecting that the poor lover had also read it and that he had in this case been entrusted with a mournful commission, she shook his hand affectionately.

" Thanks."

" Don't thank me, madame. Yes, it was hard.

"If you are fond of *brandade* of turbot, there is some excellent to be eaten to-night at Mme. Bachellery's, Rue de Londres. Your husband is standing the treat. Ring three times and enter at once."

From these stupid phrases, from this filthy and perfidious background, the truth rose up, appeared to her, aided by coincidences, memories; the name of Bachellery, so often uttered during the last year, the enigmatic articles about her engagement, this address which she had herself heard him give, the long stay at Arvillard. In a second doubt for her had passed into certainty. Besides, did not the past throw light on the present with all its actual horror? Lie and grimace, he was not, could not be anything but that. Why should that constant maker of dupes have spared her? It was she who had been mad to let herself be caught by his deceitful voice, by his banal tendernesses; and some details recurred to her which in the same second caused her to blush and to grow pale.

This time it was no more the despair accompanied by the big, pure tears of the first deceptions; an anger was mingled with it against herself for being so weak, so cowardly as to have been able to forgive, against him who had deceived her, in contempt of his promises, his oaths regarding the past error. She would have liked to convict him there, at once; but he was at Versailles, at the Chamber. The idea came to her to summon Méjean, then it went against the grain to oblige an honest man to lie. And, compelled to stifle a whole violence of contrary feelings, in order not

to shriek, to abandon herself to the terrible nerve-crisis which she felt was attacking her, she walked here and there on the carpet, her hands—with a familiar pose—on her waist freed from her peignoir. Suddenly she stopped, quivered with a mad fear.

Her child !

He was suffering, he too, and recalled himself to his mother with all the strength of a life which is struggling. Ah ! *mon Dieu*, if he were to die, this one, like the other—at the same period of pregnancy, in similar circumstances. Destiny, which is called blind, has sometimes these ferocious combinations. And she reasoned to herself in half-uttered words, in tender cries, “dear little one—poor little one,” tried to view things coolly, so as to behave with dignity and especially not to compromise the being that alone remained to her. She even took up a piece of work, that Penelope’s embroidery which the activity of the Parisian always keeps going ; because she had to wait for Numa’s return, to have an explanation with him or rather gather from his attitude the conviction of his guilt, before the irremediable sensation of a separation.

Oh ! those brilliant wools, that regular, colourless canvas, what confidences they receive, what regrets, joys, desires, form the complicated, knotted reverse, full of broken threads, in those feminine works with the flowers quietly interlaced.

Numa Roumestan, on arriving from the Chamber, found his wife plying the needle beneath the narrow brightness of a single lighted lamp, and the tranquil picture, the beautiful profile softened

by chestnut hair, in the luxurious shadow of the wadded hangings, where lacquered screens, old coppers, ivories, faïences, attracted the wandering gleams, warm with a wood fire, struck him by contrast with the noisiness of the Assembly, the bright ceilings enveloped with dust floating over the debates like a cloud of powder hovering over a field of manœuvres.

“Good-day, mama. It’s nice here with you.”

The meeting had been hot. Always that dreadful budget, the Left hanging for five hours on the heels of that poor General d’Espaillon, who could not sew two ideas together consecutively, when he did not say s—— n—— d—— D——. In fact, the cabinet was escaping this time again; but it was after New Year’s Day, when the question of the Fine Arts came on, that it would be decided.

“They count a great deal on the Cadaillac affair to give me a basting. Rougeot will speak. Not accommodating, that Rougeot. He has pluck and boldness!”

Then, with a shrug of the shoulders—

“Rougeot versus Roumestan. The North versus the South. So much the better. It will amuse me. There’ll be hard hitting.”

He talked in monologue, absorbed in the fire of business, without noticing Rosalie’s dumbness. He came quite near her, sitting on a cushion, making her leave go her work, trying to kiss her hand.

“Is it then very urgent what you’re embroidering there? Is it a present for me? As for me, I have already bought yours. Guess!”

She drew herself back gently, gazed at him so as to embarrass him, without replying. His features were wearied by the days of full-dress meeting, the tired relaxation of his face betraying at the corner of his eyes and his mouth a nature at once soft and violent, all the passions and nothing to resist them. The faces of the South are like its scenery, they must only be looked at in the sunshine.

"You're dining with me?" asked Rosalie.

"But no. I'm expected at Durand's. A boring dinner. *Té!* I'm already late," he added, rising. "Luckily there is no dressing."

His wife's gaze followed him. "Dine with me, I beg you." And her harmonious voice hardened as she insisted, became threatening, merciless. But Roumestan was not an observer. And besides, business, isn't it so? Ah! Those existences of public men are not spent as one would wish.

"Good bye, then," she said gravely, signifying by the good bye, "since that is our fate."

She heard the coupé rolling under the archway; then, carefully folding her work, she rang.

"A carriage at once. A cab. And you, Polly, my cloak, my hat. I'm going out."

Quickly ready, she inspected with a look the room she was leaving, where she regretted nothing, left nothing of hers, a regular room in furnished lodgings, under the pomp of its cold yellow brocade.

"Take this big box down to the carriage."

The "layette," everything she was taking away of the common property.

At the door of the cab, the Englishwoman, very

inquisitive, asked if madame would not dine. No, she was dining at her father's, she would also sleep there, probably.

On her way a doubt still came to her, rather a scruple. If nothing of it was true! If that Bachelery did not live in the Rue de Londres! She gave the address, without much hope; but she must have certainty.

They stopped at a small *hôtel* of two stories, surmounted by a terrace like a winter garden, the old *pied-à-terre* of a Cairo Levantine who had just died ruined. The aspect was that of a little house, windows shut, curtains down, a strong smell of cookery rising up in the lighted, noisy basements. Merely by noting the way in which the door obeyed the three rings of the bell, turned of itself on its hinges, Rosalie was fully informed. A Persian tapestry in the middle of the ante-room gave a view of the staircase, its deep-piled carpet, its lamps, the gas of which burnt on every landing. She heard laughing, advanced two steps and saw that which she never forgot—

Numa was bending over the banister on the first floor, red in the face, inflamed with excitement, in shirt-sleeves, holding by the waist that girl, also very excited, whose hair was down her back on the frills of a dishabille of pink foulard. And he cried in his boisterous tones—

“Bompard, bring up the *brandade*.”

That was when he ought to have been seen, the Minister of Public Instruction and of Religions, the great merchant of religious morality, the defender of sound doctrines, there where he showed

himself without a mask and without grimaces, all his Southern blood exposed, at ease and careless of appearances as at a Beaucaire mart.

"Bompard, bring up the *brandade*!" repeated the curious creature by his side, expressly exaggerating the Marseillaise intonation. Bompard, it was no doubt that improvised lackey, coming up from the kitchen, with his arms spread round a big dish, who was startled and turned round at the loud slamming of the door.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE SINS OF OUR YOUTH

“GENTLEMEN of the Central Administration ! ”

“Gentlemen of the Direction of Fine Arts ! ”

“Gentlemen of the Academy of Medicine ! ”

As the usher, in full dress, short breeches, sword by his side, announced them in his mournful voice in the solemnity of the reception rooms, rows of black coats crossed the huge gold and red *salon* and went and ranged themselves in a semi-circle before the minister, who was leaning against the mantelpiece, having near him his Under-Secretary of State, M. de la Calmette, his chief of cabinet, his attachés, and some directors of the ministry, Dansaert, Béchut. To each body presented by its president or its oldest member, His Excellency addressed compliments for the decorations, the academic palms awarded to some of its members ; then the body made a half-turn, gave place, and whilst they retired, others came up rapidly ; for it was late, past one, and everybody was thinking of the family lunch awaiting him.

In the concert hall, transformed into a robing-room, the groups were impatiently looking at their watches, buttoning their gloves, readjusting their

white ties beneath drawn faces, yawns of boredom, ill-temper and hunger. Roumestan, he also, was feeling the fatigue of the great day of the New Year. He had lost his splendid warmth of the preceding year on the same occasion, his faith in the future and in reforms, made flabby speeches, pierced by the cold to his marrows in spite of the heating apparatuses, the enormous flaming log ; and the little fleecy flecks of snow, that whirled at the windows, fell lightly and freezingly on his heart as on the lawn of the garden.

"Gentlemen of the Comédie-Française !"

Clean-shaven, solemn, bowing just as in Louis XIV's time, they stood in noble attitudes round their *doyen* who, in a hollow voice, introduced the Company, the Company without epithet, without qualification, just as one says "God," just as one says the "Bible," as if there existed no other Company in the world but that one ; and poor Roumestan would have had to be in the last stage of exhaustion if this Company, of which he seemed to form part, with his blue chin, his poses of conventional distinction, had not re-awakened his eloquence in big grand theatrical phrases.

The fact is that during the past week, since Rosalie's departure, he was like a gambler who has lost his mascot. He was afraid, suddenly felt himself inferior to his good fortune, and well nigh being crushed by it. The mediocrities whom luck has favoured have these faintings and these giddinesses, enhanced in his case by the frightful scandal which was about to break out, by the separation proceedings which the young wife absolutely

insisted on, in spite of letters, influences of all kinds, his grovelling prayers and his oaths. For form's sake, it was stated at the ministry that Mme. Roumestan had gone to live with her father owing to the approaching departure of Mme. Le Quesnoy and Hortense ; but nobody was taken in by it, and on all the faces defiling before him, at certain emphasized smiles, at certain excessively vibrating handshakes, the wretched man saw his misadventure reflected in pity, in curiosity, in irony. Even the humblest employers, who had come to the reception in jacket and overcoat, were " in the know " ; couplets were going the round of officers in which Chambéry was rhymed with Bachellery and which more than one of the employees, discontented with his Christmas box, hummed within him whilst bowing low to the supreme head.

Two o'clock. And the constituted bodies were still being presented, and the snow was being heaped up, whilst the man with the chair introduced pell-mell, without hierarchic order—

" Gentlemen of the School of Law ! "

" Gentlemen of the Conservatoire of Music ! "

" Messieurs, the Directors of the subventioned theatres ! "

Cadaillac came at the head, with the lead of his three bankruptcies ; and Roumestan had far more desire to use fisticuffs on the cynical showman whose nomination was causing him such grave troubles, than to listen to his fine elocution which was belied by the fierce bluffing of his look and to pay him in reply a forced compliment half of which remained in the folds of his cravat—

"Very touched, gentlemen—*mm mm mm*—progress of art—*mm mm mm*—shall do yet better."

And the showman, as he went off, commented to himself—

"He has some lead in his wing, our poor Numa."

When they had gone, the minister and his assessors did honour to the usual collation; but the lunch, so cheerful the previous year and full of effusion, was affected by the master's gloom and by the ill-humour of his household, who were all rather angry with him for the compromising of their situation. These scandalous proceedings, falling right in the middle of the Cadaillac debate, would make Roumestan impossible in the cabinet; that very morning, at the reception at the Elysée, the Marshal had said two words about it with his brutal and laconic eloquence, like the old trooper he was—"A dirty affair, my dear minister, a dirty affair."

Without precisely knowing about these august words, whispered in the ear in an embrasure, these gentlemen saw their disgrace coming behind that of their chief.

"O women! women!" grumbled the scientist Béchut into his plate. M. de la Calmette and his thirty years of office grew melancholy in thinking of retirement like Tircis; and the tall Lappara, in a whisper, amused himself by throwing Rochemaure into consternation: "Viscount, we must look out for ourselves. We shall be chucked out within a week."

After the minister's toast to the New Year and his dear fellow-workers, given in a voice in which

were tears, the company dispersed. Méjean, remaining last, paced up and down once or twice with his friend, without their having the courage to say a single word to each other; then he went away. In spite of all his longing to retain beside him that day the upright nature which intimidated him like a reproach of conscience, whilst sustaining, *comforting him, Numa could not prevent Méjean* from running away to his visits, distributions of good wishes and presents, any more than he could forbid his usher from going and freeing himself in his family circle of his sword and his short breches.

What a solitude, that ministry! And in all the rooms, below, above, in his study where he vainly tried to write, in his room which he was filling with sobs, everywhere the little January snowflakes were whirling by the broad windows, were veiling the horizon, were accentuating a steppe-like silence.

O wretchedness of *grandeurs*!

A clock struck four, another answered, and yet others in the desert of the vast palace. The notion of remaining there till night, face to face with his grief, frightened him. He wanted to unfreeze himself with a little friendship, affection. All those heating-apparatuses, haloes of trees in combustion, did not make a hearth. For a moment he thought of the Rue de Londres. But he had sworn to his advocate, for proceedings were already begun, to keep quiet till they came on. Suddenly a name crossed his mind: "And Bompard?" Why had he not come? Usually, on fête morn-

ings, he would arrive the first, his arms laden with bouquets, bags of bonbons for Rosalie, Hortense, Mme. Le Quesnoy, on his lips a smile expressive of grandpapa, of Santa Claus. Be it understood that Roumestan paid the expenses of those surprises ; but friend Bompard had enough imagination to forget it, and Rosalie, despite her antipathy, could not prevent herself feeling softer towards him, as she reflected on the privations the poor devil must have imposed on himself to be so generous.

“ If I went and fetched him, we could dine together.”

He was reduced to that. He rang, took off his black suit, his plaques, his Orders, and went on foot by the Rue Bellechasse.

The quays, the bridges were quite white ; but when the Carrousel had been crossed, there was no trace of snow on the ground or in the air. It disappeared in the traffic of the street, in the swarming of the crowd hurrying on the pavements. The tumult of the festive night, the cries of the coachmen, the shouts of the street-porters, amid the luminous confusion of the windows, the yellow winking of gas-jets and the last reflections of the pale daylight, soothed Roumestan's chagrin, merged him with the bustle of the street, whilst going towards the Boulevard Poissonnière where the ex-Circassian, who was very sedentary, like all people of imagination, had sojourned for twenty years, since his arrival in Paris.

After going up innumerable floors, wandered in vast passages, and tumbling on invisible stairs,

Roumestan, put out of breath by the ascent to which his illustrious legs as of a successful man were no longer adapted, knocked up against a large wash-basin hanging on the wall.

"Who's there?" drawled an accent he knew.

The door turned slowly, because on it hung all the winter and summer clothing of the lodger; for the room was small and Bompard did not lose a millimetre of it, being reduced to establishing his dressing-room in the corridor. His friend found him lying on a small iron bedstead, his forehead adorned with a scarlet coiffure, a sort of Dantesque headdress which bristled up with astonishment at the sight of the illustrious visitor.

"Not possible!"

"Are you ill?" asked Roumestan.

"Ill?—never."

"Then what are you doing there?"

"You see, I'm collecting my wits," he added, to explain his thought: "I have so many schemes in my head, so many inventions. At moments, I am scattered, I am dazed. It's only in bed I recover myself a bit."

Roumestan looked for a chair; but there was only one, serving as a night-table, laden with books, with papers, and a candle was guttering on it. He sat at the foot of the bed.

"Why haven't I seen you again?"

"But you're joking. After what happened, I couldn't meet your wife again. Think a bit! I was there, in front of her, the *brandade* in my hands! I must have been amazingly cool not to let it drop."

"Rosalie is no longer at the ministry," observed Numa, in consternation.

"So the matter was not arranged? You astonish me."

It did not seem possible to him that Mme Numa, a person of so much good sense.—Because, after all, what was there in the whole thing?

"An escapade, a spree!"

The other broke in—

"You don't know her. She's a ruthless woman—the spit of her father. Northern race, my dear fellow. They're not like us, whose most violent wrath evaporates in gestures, in threats, and nothing else. They remember everything, it's dreadful."

He did not say she had already forgiven him once. Then, in order to escape such dreary broodings—

"Dress. I'll take you to dinner."

Whilst Bompard was proceeding with his toilet on the landing, the minister inspected the attic, lit by a small window, on to which fell the melting snow. He was seized with pity in the presence of the bareness, the damp walls, the bleached paper, the little stove, fireless in spite of the season, and asked himself, accustomed to the sumptuous comfort of his palace, how any one could live there.

"Have you seen the garden?" cheerfully cried Bompard from his basin.

The garden! it was the leafless top of three plane-trees which could only be seen by clambering on the sole chair in the room.

"And my little museum?"

He gave this name to some labelled débris: a

brick, a short pipe in hard wood, a rusty blade, an ostrich egg. But the brick came from the Alhambra, the knife had served in the vendettas of a famous Corsican bandit, the pipe bore the inscription: "Pipe of Moorish convict"; finally, the hardened egg represented the abortion of a beautiful dream, all that remained—of the Bompard hatcher and artificial culture. Oh! he had a better scheme than that now. A marvellous idea, with millions in it, which he could not mention yet.

"You madman!" said Roumestan, with a shade of envy for that miserable victim of chimeras, so happy in his tatters and rags. "You have a splendid imagination. Are you ready? Come! Let's go down. There's a black frost in your room."

A few turnings, amid the merry masses of the Boulevard, and the two friends were seated in the heady, beaming heat of a *cabinet* in a grand restaurant, oysters opened, the Château-Yquem carefully uncorked.

"Your health, comrade. May it be good and lucky!"

"*Té!* that's right," said Bompard, "we have not yet kissed each other."

They embraced over the table, their eyes moist; and tanned though the Circassian's hide was, Roumestan felt quite revived. He had been longing to embrace some one since the morning. Then, it was so many years since they knew each other, thirty years of their lives spread before them; and amid the steaming of delicate dishes, with

luxurious wines, they recalled the days of youth, of brotherly memories, races, parties, saw again their faces as boys, interlarded their effusions with *patois* words which brought them yet nearer together.

"*T'en souvenés, digo ?* I say, you remember ? "

In a side-saloon, shrill laughing, little cries could be heard.

"To the deuce with females ! " said Roumestan, "only friendship counts."

And they again drank to each other. But all the same their talk took a fresh turn.

"And the little one ? " asked Bompard, winking. "How is she ? "

"Oh ! I haven't seen her again, you understand."

"Of course, of course," replied the other, suddenly very grave, with a consequential nod.

Now, behind the hangings, a piano was playing fragments of fashionable valse, quadrilles, refrains of operettas, alternatively boisterous or languid. They were silent so as to listen ; and Numa began thinking of his wife, of his child, of his lost happiness, poured forth his heart out loud, with his elbows on the table.

"Eleven years of intimacy, of trust, of affection. All that burnt out, vanished in a moment. Is it possible ? Ah ! Rosalie, Rosalie——"

Nobody would ever know what she had been for him ; and he did not himself understand it properly until her departure. Her mind so upright, her heart so honest. And what shoulders she had, and what arms ! Not a sawdust doll like the little one. Something full, white, delicate,

"Besides, you see, comrade, it can't be denied that when one is young, one wants surprises, adventures. The hasty meetings, made more pleasing by the fear of being caught, the staircases descended four at a time, all that forms part of love. But at our age what we desire more than anything else is peace, what the philosophers call security in pleasure. Only marriage gives that."

He got up with a start, threw down his napkin : "Let's be off, *té!*"

"We're going?" asked Bompard, impassive.

"To pass under her window, like twelve years ago. That's the point he has reached, my dear chap, the Grand Master of the University."

Under the arches of the Place Royale, the friends walked a long time.

"To think she's there," sighed Roumestan, "so near, and that I can't see her!"

Bompard was shivering, with his feet in the slush, did not understand clearly this sentimental excursion. To put an end to it, he used a trick, an dknowing him to be a molly-coddle, frightened at the least symptom of illness—

"You'll catch cold, Numa," he traitorously suggested.

The Southerner was afraid, and they got back into the carriage.

She was there, in the drawing-room where he had seen her the first time and whose furniture remained the same in the same places, having reached the age when furniture, like character, does not renew itself any more. Perhaps a few faded folds in the tawny hangings, a mist on the

brilliance of the mirrors as on desert pools which nothing disturbs. The faces of the old parents bending beneath the two-branched lamps, in company with their habitual partners, had also something more worn out about them. Mme. Le Quesnoy, with her features swollen and sagging, as if defibred, the President accentuating yet more his pallor and the proud revolt he kept in the bitter blue of his eyes. Seated near a large arm-chair whose cushions were hollowed by a slight impression, Rosalie, her sister having gone to bed, was continuing in a low voice the reading which she had only just been doing out loud, amid the silence of a game of whist, interrupted by the half-words, the exclamations of the players. It was a book of her youth, one of the poets of nature whom her father had taught her to love; and from the white of the strophes she saw rising her whole past as a young woman, the fresh and penetrating impression of the first reading.

La belle aurait pu sans souci
Manger ses fraises loin d'ici,
Au bord d'une claire fontaine,
Avec un joyeux moissonneur
Qui l'aurait prise sur son cœur.
Elle aurait eu bien moins de peine.

The book slipped from her hands to her knees, the last verses resounding in sad harmony with the deepest of her being, reminding her of her misfortune which for a moment had been forgotten. That is the cruelty of poets; they soothe you, they calm you, then with a single phrase they quicken the wound they were about to heal.

She saw herself again at this spot, twelve years before, when Numa was paying her court, and when, adorned with her twenty years, with the desire of being beautiful for him, she saw him coming by that window, just as one watches one's fate. There remained in every corner echoes of his warm, tender voice, so ready at lying. With a little search among the music lying on the piano, she could have found the duets they sang together; and all her surroundings seemed to her to have conspired in the disaster of her failure in life. She pondered over what it might have been, that life, beside an honourable man, a loyal companion, not a brilliant, ambitious life, but simple and obscure, in which they would have valiantly borne together their sorrows, their mournings, even to death—

Elle aurait eu bien moins de peine.

She was so absorbed in her thoughts that, when the whist was over, the habitual guests had gone away without her having almost observed it, as she replied mechanically to the friendly and compassionate greeting of each, not noticing that the President, instead of accompanying his friends to the door, as he was in the habit of doing every night whatever the weather or season, was walking with long strides up and down the drawing-room, stopped at last in front of her to question her in a voice that made her suddenly tremble.

"Well, my child, what have you arrived at? What is your decision?"

"But always the same, father."

He sat down by her, took her hand, tried to be persuasive.

"I've seen your husband. He consents to everything. You'll live here with me the whole time your mother and sister are away; afterwards also, if your resentment still lasts. But I say again, these proceedings are impossible. I venture to hope you won't go on with them."

Rosalie shook her head.

"You don't know the man, father. He will use his cunning to envelop me, to get me back, to make a dupe of me, a voluntary dupe, accepting a degraded existence, without dignity. Your daughter is not one of those women. I wish for a complete irreparable rupture, proclaimed aloud to the world."

From the table where she was putting the cards in order, Mme. Le Quesnoy intervened gently, without turning—

"Forgive, my child, forgive."

"Yes, it's easy to say so when one has a loyal, straightforward husband like yours, when one does not know the stifling atmosphere of lies and treachery around one. He's a hypocrite, I tell you. He has his Chambéry morals and his Rue de Londres morals. Words and deeds always conflicting. Two words, two faces. All the catlike nature and seductiveness of his race. A man of the South, in fact!"

And forgetting herself in an outburst of anger—

"Besides, I had already forgiven once. Yes, two years after my marriage. I didn't tell you about it. I didn't tell any one about it. I

was very, unhappy. We then only remained together after he had sworn an oath. But he only lives on perjuries. Now, it's finished, finished once and for all."

The President no longer insisted, got up slowly and came to his wife. There was a whispering like an argument, surprising, between the authoritative man and the humble, annihilated creature, his wife: "She must be told. Yes—yes—I want you to tell her." Without another word, M. Le Quesnoy went out, and his sonorous, regular footstep, as on every night, echoed up from the deserted arches to the solemnity of the great drawing-room.

"Come here," said the mother to her daughter with an affectionate gesture, "Nearer, still nearer." She would never venture on it in a loud voice. And even, when so near, heart against heart, she still hesitated—"Listen, he wishes it. He wants me to tell you that your fate is that of all women, and that your mother has not escaped it."

Rosalie was frightened by that confidence which she guessed at the first words, whilst a dear old voice, broken with tears, spelt out with difficulty a sad, very sad story in every respect similar to her own, the husband's adultery in the first days of marriage, as if the device of these poor coupled beings were "deceive me or I'll deceive you," and the man hastened to begin so as to keep his superior rank.

"Oh! enough, enough, mama, you are hurting me."

Her father whom she admired so much, whom she

set above every one else, the upright, firm magistrate! She who had not wept for her husband's treachery, felt a flood of tears at this humiliation of her father. And they reckoned on it to overcome her! No, a hundred times no, she would not pardon. Ah! that was marriage, was it? Well, all the more shame and contempt for marriage! What mattered the fear of scandal and the convention of society, since the point was who would brave them the best?

Her mother had taken her, pressed her against her heart, trying to quieten the revolt of this young conscience wounded in its beliefs, in its dearest superstitions, and gently she fondled, as if rocking her.

"Yes, you will pardon—you will do as I did. It's our lot, you see. Ah! at the first moment I, too, I had a great grief, a great longing to jump out of the window. But I thought of my child, my poor little André who was born, who grew up after, who died laughing, respecting all his family. You likewise, you will pardon in order that your child may enjoy the happy calm which my courage procured you, in order that he may not be one of those half-orphans whom the parents share, whom they bring up in hatred and contempt the one of the other. You will reflect also that your father and your mother have already suffered much and that other despairs are threatening them."

She stopped, overwhelmed. Then in solemn accents—

"My daughter, all griefs become appeased, all

wounds may heal. There is only one irreparable misfortune, that is the death of those whom one loves."

In the state of emotional exhaustion that followed the last words, Rosalie saw her mother's face growing the greater by all that her father was losing in her eyes. She was angry with herself at having misunderstood her so long under the apparent weakness resulting from blows of anguish, from sublime and resigned self-renunciation. And accordingly it was to obey her, and to obey only her, that in gentle words, almost of forgiveness, she abandoned her proceedings of vengeance. "Only don't ask me to go back to him. I should be too ashamed. I shall accompany my sister to the South. Afterwards, later, we shall see."

The President returned. He saw the impulsive affection of the old mother throwing her arms round her child's neck and understood that their cause was won.

"Thanks, my daughter," he murmured, deeply touched. Then, after hesitating a little, he approached Rosalie for the usual "good-night." But the forehead so affectionately offered as a rule was not offered to be caressed, the kiss slipped into her hair.

"Good-night, my father."

He said nothing, went away with bent head, with a convulsive shudder of his high shoulders. He who in his life had accused so much, condemned so much, he found a judge in his turn, the first magistrate of France!

CHAPTER XIX

HORTENSE LE QUESNOY

BY one of those sudden dramatic strokes, so frequent in Parliamentary comedy, the meeting of January 8, at which Roumestan's lucky star seemed bound to set, turned out a famous triumph. When he mounted the tribune to reply to Rougeot's hard-hitting satire on the management of the Opéra, the scandal about the Beaux-Arts, the emptiness of the reforms so loudly clarified forth, Numa had just learnt that his wife had gone away, renouncing all proceedings, and the good news, known to himself alone, gave an effulgent assurance to his answer. He showed himself disdainful, familiar, solemn, made allusions to whispered calumnies, to the expected scandal—

“There will be no scandal, gentlemen!”

And the tone in which he said it caused lively disappointment, in the tribunes crowded with toilettes, to all the pretty inquisitives, greedy of strong emotions, who had come there to witness the devouring of the tamer. Rougeot's interpellation was reduced to rags, the South seduced the North, Gaul was once more conquered, and when

Roumestan went down again, exhausted, voiceless, he had the pride of seeing his party, which recently was so cold, almost hostile, his colleagues in the cabinet who accused him of compromising them, surround him with acclamations, with enthusiastic flatteries. And in the intoxication of the success there always recurred to him, as a supreme deliverance, his wife's renunciation.

He felt satisfied with all the world, calmed down, expansive, so much so that on returning to Paris he had the idea of going to the Rue de Londres. Oh! only as a friend, to comfort the poor child who was as uneasy as himself at the consequences of the interpellation, and who endured their mutual exile with so much courage, sent him in her naïve handwriting dried with rice-powder nice little letters in which she told him about her daily life, exhorted him to patience, to prudence.

"No, no, don't come, poor dear—write to me, think of me—I shall be strong."

It just happened there was no performance at the Opéra that night, and during the short drive from the station to the Rue de Londres, whilst clasping in his hand the little key that had tempted him more than one during the past fortnight, Numa was thinking—

"How happy she will be!"

The door being opened and shut without noise, he found himself suddenly in darkness; the gas had not been lit. This negligence lent the little house an aspect of mourning, of widowhood, which flattered him. The carpet on the staircase

deadening his steps as he quickly went up, he arrived, without anything to proclaim his presence, in the drawing-room adorned with Japanese stuffs in deliciously false shades to suit the factitious gold of the little one's hair.

"Who's there?" asked a pretty, irritated voice from the divan.

"I, *pardi!*"

There was a cry, and leap, and in the twilight the singer got up, frightened, whilst the handsome Lappara, motionless, overcome, stared at the flowers of the carpet so as not to meet his chief's eyes. Nothing could be denied.

"Dirty scamps!" said Roumestan in his throat, strangled by one of those furies in which the beast roars in the man with the desire of tearing to pieces, of biting, rather than of striking.

He found himself outside without knowing it, carried away by fear of his own violence. At the same place, at the same time, some days before, his wife had received, like him, a treacherous blow, an outraging, dastardly wound, cruel in another way, undeserved in another way than his own; but he did not think of it an instant, being absorbed in indignation at the personal insult. No, never had such villainy been seen under the sun. That Lappara whom he loved like a son, that creature of a singer for whom he had compromised even his political fortunes!

"A dirty lot!—a dirty lot!" he repeated out loud in the lonely street, under a penetrating drizzle which calmed him more effectively than the finest reasonings.

"*Té!* but I am drenched!"

He ran to the cab-rank in the Rue d'Amsterdam.

Instead of the rest he reckoned on taking when he returned, a fresh blow awaited him at the ministry, a telegram which Méjean had opened in his absence and which he handed to him, greatly agitated.

"Hortense is dying. She wishes to see you. Come quickly. Portal."

All his fearful selfishness was vented in a desolate cry—

"I shall lose a being devoted to me!"

Next he thought of his wife who was present at the death agony and let Aunt Portal sign the message. Her resentment was not abated, would probably never be abated. But if she had only wished it, how he would have begun life again by her side, cured of imprudent follies, a family man, honourable, almost austere! And thinking no more of the harm he had done her, he reproached her for her hardness as an injustice. He spent the night in correcting the proofs of his speech, interrupting himself to write sketches of letters, furious or ironical, scolding and hissing, to that rascally Alice Bachellery. Méjean, too, was awake at the secretariate, eaten up with sorrow, seeking forgetfulness in excessive work; and Numa, tempted by his being near, felt a real punishment at not being able to tell him of his deception. But it would have been necessary to confess he had returned to the woman and the ridiculousness of his part in the drama.

He did not, however, stick to his point; and in

the morning, when his chief of cabinet accompanied him to the station, he left him among other instructions the business of dismissing Lappara. "Oh! He's expecting it right enough. I caught him red-handed in an act of the blackest ingratitude. When I think how kind I have been to him, even to the extent of wanting to make him—" He broke off short. Was he not about to relate to the lover that he had promised the hand of Hortense twice? Without further explanation, he declared he did not wish to meet again at the ministry so sadly immoral a character. For the rest, the duplicity of the world disheartened him. Ingratitude, egoism. It was enough to make anybody throw up the whole thing, honours, affairs, to make him leave Paris and become the keeper of a lighthouse on a wild rock, in the open sea.

"You've slept badly, my dear chief," said Méjean with his quiet air.

"No, no—it's as I told you—Paris gives me the nausea."

Standing on the departure platform, he turned with a gesture of disgust towards the great city where the provinces pour out all their ambitions, their covetousnesses, their seething and filthy excess, and which they then accuse of perversity and infection.

Roumestan got into his carriage, pierced to the bones by the cold of his sleepless night, shivering as he saw at the windows the gloomy prospects of the *faubourg*, the iron bridges over wet streets, the high houses, barracks of miserable poverty, with innumerable windows furnished with rags, those

morning faces, haggard, mournful, sordid, those bent backs, those arms clasped round the chest for concealment or for warming, those public-houses with all kinds of signboards, that forest of factory chimneys spewing forth their heavy smoke. He closed his eyes at the sight of that heart-rending Northern winter, which the whistle of the train traversed with long calls of distress; but beneath his shut eyelids his thoughts were not more smiling. Whilst so close to that beast of a woman, the severing of his bond with whom still stabbed his heart, he thought of what he had done for her, of what the keeping of a "star" for six months had cost him. Everything is false in theatre life, especially the success which is not worth buying. Expenses of the *claque*, management tickets, dinners, receptions, presents for the reporters, publicity in all its forms, and those magnificent bouquets at which the artiste blushes, is stirred with emotion as she loads her arms, her bare breast, the satin of her dress; and the ovations, the escorts to the hotel, the serenades at the balcony, those continual stimulants of the dull indifference of the public, all that had to be paid for and very costly it is. For six months he had kept his purse open, never haggling with the little one about her triumphs.

He ended by going to sleep, his features drawn with disgust, with fatigue, his whole body shaken by the rushes, by the metallic leaps of an express going at full speed.

"*Valeince ! Valeince !*"

He opened his eyes again, like a child whom its

mother is calling. The South was already beginning, the sky was hollowed by blue abysses between the clouds which the wind drove away. A sunbeam warmed the glass, and some meagre olive trees whitened among the pines. There was a calming in the Southerner's whole sensitive being, a change of Pole in his ideas. He was sorry he had been so hard to Lappara. To spoil in that way the poor young man's future, to distress a whole family, and why? "An escapade, come now!" as Bompard said.

There was only one way of reparation, of removing any appearance of disgrace from this dismissal from the ministry—the Cross. And the minister began laughing at the idea of the name of Lappara in the *Officiel* with the mention, *exceptional services*. It was one, after all, to have delivered his chief from a degrading *liaison*.

Orange! Montélimar and its *nougat*! The voices vibrated, emphasized with lively gestures. The waiters at the buffet, the newspaper hawkers, the inspectors were rushing about, their eyes starting out of their heads. They were certainly a different people from those thirty leagues higher up; and the Rhône, the broad Rhône, billowy as the sea, glittered beneath the sun which gilded the crenelated ramparts of Avignon whose bells, working since Rabelais's time, greeted with their clear carillons the great man of Provence. Numa sat down at a buffet table with a small white roll, a croustade, a bottle of that wine of La Nerte ripened between the rocks, which is capable of giving even a Parisian a Southern accent.

But where his native air revived him most was when, having left the main line at Tarascon, he took his seat in the small, patriarchal, single-lined railway, which penetrates the heart of Provence between the branches of mulberry and olive trees, whilst the flowers of wild rose bushes brush against the windows. There was singing in all the carriages, they stopped every instant to let a flock of sheep pass, to get a laggard on board, to take a package which a farm-hand was bringing at a run. And there were greetings, gossipings between the people in the train and the farmers' wives in Arles coifs, on the steps of their doors or washing with soap on the stone of the well. At the stations there were cries, hustling, a whole village gathered together as escort to a conscript or to a girl who is going out to service in the town.

"*Té! vé,* good-bye, darling—be very brave now, come!"

They weep, they kiss.

Leaning back in his carriage to escape ovations, Roumestan enjoyed himself at all this good humour, at the sight of those brown faces lit up with passion and irony, of those tall, knowing-looking youths, of those women coloured like the long grains of the muscat, who would become, as they grew old, similar to those grandmothers there, black and dried up by the sun, shaking off some dust of the tomb at each of their emphatic gestures. He found his people again there, his mobile and nervous Provence, a race of brown crickets, always at the door, and always singing!

He was himself the prototype of them, already

cured of his deep despair of the morning, of his disgusts, of his love, swept away at the first breath of the mistral which blew strong in the Rhône valley, lifting the train, checking its advance, driving everything before it, the trees bent in an attitude of flight, the Alpilles retreating in the distance, the sun shaken by sudden eclipses, whilst afar off the town of Aps, under a ray of whipped light, grouped its monuments at the foot of the ancient tower of the Antonines, even as a herd of oxen in the middle of Camargue gathers round the oldest bullock, so as to make headway against the wind.

And it was to the sound of that grandiose fanfare of the mistral that Numa made his entry into the station. From a feeling of delicacy equivalent to his own, the family had kept his coming secret, in order to avoid the orpheons, banners, solemn deputations. Aunt Portal was waiting alone for him, pompously installed in the station-master's armchair, a foot-warmer under her feet. As soon as she caught sight of her nephew, the pink face of the fat lady, which had expanded during his rest, took on a desolate expression; and stretching out her arms, she burst into sobs and laments.

"*Aïe de nous*, what misfortune! Such a pretty little one, *péchère*! And so brave! so gentle! that one would have taken the bread out of one's mouth for her."

"*Mon Dieu!* Is it over then?" thought Roumestan, recalled to the reality of his journey.

Under the bare trees of the Avenue Berchère,

so long, under the flames of the setting sun which empurpled the room, that her sister grew disquieted.

"Are you sleeping?"

Hortense shook her head, as if to drive away something.

"No, I wasn't sleeping; and yet I was dreaming—I dreamt I was going to die. I was just on the borders of this world, leaning towards the other—oh! leaning and about to fall. I still saw you and bits of my room; but I was already on the other side, and what struck me was the silence of life compared with the great noise made by the dead. The noise of a beehive, of beating wings, the roar the sea leaves at the bottom of big shells. As if death was peopled, encumbered in a different way from life. And that so intense, it seemed to me that my ears heard for the first time, that I was discovering a new sense for myself."

She spoke slowly with her raucous, hissing voice. After a silence, she went on with the utmost vivacity of which the broken, worn-out instrument was capable.

"My head's always travelling. First prize for imagination, Hortense Le Quesnoy, of Paris!"

They heard a sob, stifled in the noise of a door shutting.

"You see," said Rosalie, "that's mama going away. You give her pain."

"On purpose—every day a little—so that she may have less all at one time," replied the girl in a whisper. Through the great passages of the

"There is only one irreparable misfortune, it is the loss of what one loves."

Her other grief, her destroyed happiness as a wife, all vanished. She only thought of that horrible, inevitable thing, nearer day by day. Was this the hour, this red, fugitive sun which left the garden in the shadow and lingered at the windows of the house, that sorrowful wind blowing from on high, which could be heard without going out? At that moment she endured a sadness, an anguish inexpressible. Hortense, her Hortense! more than a sister for her, almost a son, her first joys of precocious motherhood. Sobs stifled her, without tears. She would have wished to cry out, to call for help, but whom? The heavens, to which the desperate look, was so high, so far, so cold, as if polished by the hurricane. A flight of travelling birds was hastening there, whose cries and sail-like creaking of wings one could not hear. How could a voice from the earth reach those mute, indifferent depths?

There was a call from the house. She ran up trembling, having reached that state of nervous fear in which the least noise re-echoes even to the inmost of one's being. With a smile the sick woman drew her near the bed, having no more any strength or voice, as if she had just been talking a long time.

"I have a favour to ask you, my darling. You know, that last favour which is granted to one who is condemned to death. Forgive your husband. He has been wicked, unworthy with you but be indulgent, return to him. Do that for me,

CHAPTER XX

A BAPTISM

THE great day in Aps is Monday, market day.

Well before dawn the roads leading to the town, those deserted highways of Arles and Avignon where the dust looks calm as a fall of snow, are stirred by the slow creaking of wagons, the cackling of fowls, the barking of dogs, the bleating of sheep, the shouts of oxherds panting after their beasts. Then, on awaking, the town finds itself occupied on every side by a huge, animated, noisy market, as if the whole of rural Provence, men and cattle, fruits and grains, had risen, assembled together in a nocturnal inundation.

On the morning in question, the third Monday in February, the animation was lively and the crowd compact as on the finest days in summer, an illusion of which was given by a cloudless sky, gilded by a hot sun. People were talking, gesticulating in groups; but there was less question of buying and selling than of an event which suspended the traffic, turned all looks, all heads towards the church of Sainte-Perpétue. The

triumphant, modulated, then cut short by the sight of a tall old man, dressed in black, exceedingly haggard, exceedingly mournful for a godfather, giving his arm to Mme. Portal, who was very proud at having served as godmother with the First President, their names united on the parochial register, but who was sombre in feeling from her recent mourning and the sad impressions she had just received again in the church. There was a deception of the crowd in the aspect of that severe-looking couple, who were followed, all in black, too, and gloved, by the great man of Aps, chilled by the loneliness and cold of that baptism between four wax-tapers, without other music than the whinings of the baby on whom the Latin of the Sacrament and the lustral water on its tender little head, as of a plucked bird, had made the most disagreeable impression. But the appearance of a buxom nurse, broad, heavy, be-ribboned like a prize animal at a cattle-show, and the bright little parcel of lace and white embroideries which she dandled in her arms dissipated the spectator's depression, gave rise to a fresh outcry as at a mounting rocket, a cheery mirthfulness scattered in a thousand enthusiastic exclamations.

"Lou vaqui, there he is—vé ! vé !"

Surprised, dazzled, blinking in the sun, Roumes-tan stopped a moment on the high perron to look at those brown faces, whence a wild emotion of affection rose up to him ; and though used to ovations, he felt one of the liveliest emotions in his existence as a publicist, a proud intoxication which was ennobled by a quite new and already

white woodwork, whose silks dated back a century, Rosalie, reclining on an easy-chair, gazing from the empty cradle to the lonely, sunny street, was impatiently expecting her child's return. On her refined features, bloodless, hollowed with fatigue and tears, in which there nevertheless appeared, as it were, a happy calm, one could read the story of her life during the last months, anxieties, agonies, her rupture with Numa, the death of her Hortense, and finally the birth of the child, which surpassed everything. When this great happiness had come to her, she no longer was reckoning on it, broken by so many blows, thinking herself unable to give life to anything. During the last days she fancied she no longer felt the impatient movements of the little imprisoned being; and she hid the cradle, the "layette," which was all ready, from a superstitious fear, telling only the Englishwoman who served her: "If you are asked for baby's clothes, you'll know where to get them."

At last, after a bed of torture, her eyes shut, her teeth clenched, after long hours broken every five minutes by a harrowing cry, half-killed, she heard that attempt at a voice, that crying respiration, that call to the light, of the child which is born. She answered it, oh! with what overflowing tenderness.

"My little one!"

He was alive. They brought him to her. To her belonged that tiny creature with the short breath, dazed, bewildered, almost blind; that thing of flesh attached her again to existence,

and merely by pressing it against her, the whole fever of her body was drowned in a feeling of comforting freshness. No more mourning, no more wretchedness! Her child, her boy, that desire, that regret she had endured for ten years, which burnt her eyes with tears when she looked at others' children, that baby she had kissed beforehand on so many darling pink cheeks! He was there and caused her a new rapture, a surprise, each time she leaned from her bed towards the cradle, parted the muslin resting on the slumbering child with its scarcely audible breathing. She wanted it always near her. When it went out she was restless, counted the minutes, but never with such anguish as on that baptism morning.

"What time is it?" she asked every moment. "How late they are! Heavens! how long it is."

Mme. Le Quesnoy, who had remained with her daughter, reassured her, though herself a little anxious, for this grandson, the first, the only one, was very strongly bound up with the hearts of the grandparents, brightened their mourning with a hope.

A distant uproar, which was approaching, redoubled the women's disquiet.

They go and see, they listen. Songs, detonations, shouts, bell-ringing. And suddenly the Englishwoman, who was looking outside, exclaimed—

"Madame, it's the baptism!"

It was the baptism, that uproarious tumult, those cannibalistic howlings round a warrior's meal.

"Oh! that South—that South!" repeated the frightened young mother. She trembled lest they should stifle her baby in the midst of them.

But no. There he was, very much alive, in splendid condition, moving his short little arms, his eyes wide open in the long baptismal robe.

"He didn't cry once, nor take the breast once the whole way!" affirms Aunt Portal, who relates in her flowery way the triumphant circuit of the town, whilst the old *hôtel* becomes again the house of ovations, and the servants hasten to the porch to serve the musicians with "something gassy." Trumpets blare forth, windows shake. The old Le Quesnoys have gone down into the garden, far from that merry-making which rends their hearts; and as Roumestan is about to speak on the balcony, Aunt Portal, and English Polly go quickly into the drawing-room to hear him.

"If madame would kindly hold the baby!" asks the nurse, who is inquisitive as a woman of the wilds, and Rosalie is quite happy to be alone, her baby on her knees. From her window she sees the banners gleaming in the wind, the close-packed crowd, intent upon the words of its great man. Some words of the speech reach her in snatches; but she hears especially the *timbre* of that captivating, stirring voice, and a painful shudder passed through her at the memory of all the evil that has come to her from that eloquence which is skilled to lie and to dupe.

At present, it is over; she feels herself sheltered from deception and wounds. She has a child. That sums up all her happiness, all her dreams.

And making herself a buckler of the dear little creature, whom she presses over her breast, she asks him in a low voice, quite close, as if she sought an answer or a resemblance of one in that little shapeless face, those slight lineaments which seem impressed by a caress in wax and already indicate a sensual, violent mouth, a nose curved for adventure, a dimpled, square chin.

"Will you be a liar, you too? Will you spend your life in betraying others and yourself, in breaking simple hearts which shall have done no other harm than to believe in you and love you? Will you be light-heartedly and cruelly fickle, taking life as a virtuoso, as a singer of cavatinas? Will you make a traffic in words, without disquieting yourself about their value, about their agreement with your thought, provided they shine and they sound?"

And her mouth kissing the little ear surrounded by wandering curls—

"Will you be a Roumestan, say?"

On the balcony, the orator was exciting himself, was gushing forth into the effusivenesses of which one could only hear the beginnings, emphasized in Southern manner: "My soul—My blood—Morality—Religion—Country"—punctuated by the hurrahs of an audience made in his image, which he summed up, in its qualities and in its vices, an effervescent, mobile South, tumultuous as a sea with many billows, each of which reflected it.

There was a last *vivat*, then the crowd was heard dispersing slowly. Roumestan entered the room

wiping his forehead, and intoxicated with his triumph, warmed by the inexhaustible affection shown him by a whole people, approached his wife, kissed her with sincere effusion. He felt kind to her, tender as on the first day, without remorse as without rancour.

"*Bé !* Don't they fête him, monsieur your son !"

Kneeling by the canopy, the great man of Aps played with his child, looked for its little fingers which hold on to everything, its little feet beating the air. Rosalie looked at him, a fold on her forehead, trying to define that contradictory, inexplicable nature.

Then she observed in a lively tone, as if she had found out—

"Numa, what's that proverb of your race which Aunt Portal mentioned the other day?—'Joy of street'—what was the rest?"

"Ah ! yes—'Gau de carriero, doulou d'oustau—Joy of street, grief of house.'"

"That's it," she said with a deep expression.

And dropping the words one by one like stones in an abyss, she repeated slowly, putting into it the complaint of her life, that proverb in which a whole race has been painted and formulated—

"Joy in street, grief in house."

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